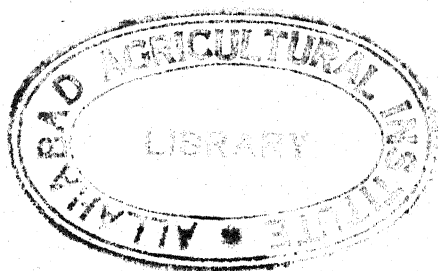


Mountain Pony
AND
The Rodeo Mystery

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HENRY V. LAROM

Mountain Pony AND The Rodeo Mystery

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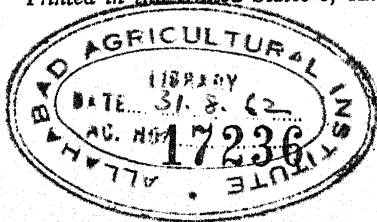
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MOUNTAIN PONY AND THE RODEO MYSTERY

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For Captain and Mrs. Theodore W. Johnson

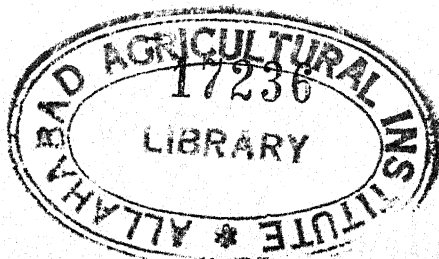


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*Down in the horse corral a-standing alone
Was a little cavio, a strawberry roan:
He had little pin ears that most touched at the tip,
And the 44 brand was on his left hip.*

*He was spavined all round and he had pigeon toes,
Little pig eyes and a big roman nose;
He was ewe necked and old with a long lower jaw,
I could tell at a glance he was a regular outlaw.*

—from an old cowboy song

1

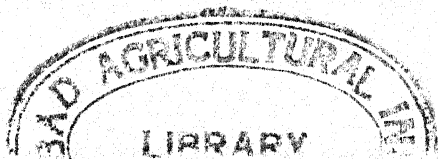
Danger on Castle Creek

I'D RATHER PITCH hay or dig postholes, or even be a dishwasher," Andy thought to himself as he rode up the trail that led toward Castle Creek. "Anything is better than guiding dudes!"

On the Dude Ranch where Andy Marvin had a job as an assistant horse wrangler, the season had reached its peak. So many guests wanted to ride the Wyoming Rockies that every available hand on the place was "jingling dudes," and Andy had orders to lead a Mr. and Mrs. Bennett and their eight-year-old son, Tommy, up Castle Creek Canyon.

It was a big responsibility, taking inexperienced people on the high trails. As they traveled along, Indian file, over the hills, Andy had to look back every few feet to make sure Mr. Bennett was giving his horse enough rein, that Mrs. Bennett's saddle was straight, and little Tommy wasn't leaning way out of his to pick up an old deer horn. Andy almost wished he was back on his Uncle Wes Marvin's ranch where he had lived before he had a job.

The only good thing about the whole trip was that Sally,





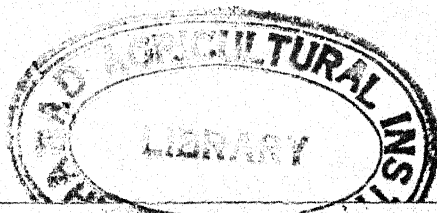
IT WAS A BIG RESPONSIBILITY, TAKING

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Sho. Janin

INEXPERIENCED PEOPLE ON THE HIGH TRAILS



Uncle Wes's adopted daughter, was riding along behind them, hunting horses. And even she wasn't much help. When Andy looked around to check the saddles, she made faces at him and imitated Mr. Bennett, who sat his horse like a heavy sack of corn meal.

Looking away from her, Andy gazed up at the mouth of the canyon, a narrow gap in the wall of mountains rising in front of them. Here on the sun-baked sidehills no wind stirred, and Sunny, Andy's sorrel horse, was sweating until the reins made a white lather along his neck. But high among the peaks a thunderstorm muttered, and black clouds tinged with yellow swirled around the distant chimney rocks.

Andy didn't like it. This was cloudburst weather.

"Say, Marvin—" Mr. Bennett interrupted his thoughts—"is it true that you're an Easterner?"

There was no use denying it, even if he wanted to. "Yes," Andy said, uncomfortably. "I'm from New York. But I've done a lot of riding out here," he added quickly.

"I'm not sure I like them sending an Easterner with us, a mere child," Mrs. Bennett said, fretfully.

"There's no danger, anyway," Mr. Bennett answered. "He's just showing us the way."

Andy could almost feel Sally laughing at him. He wished that Mr. Bennett's horse would crowhop just once. One little jump would do the trick.

"Andy's just a dude," little Tommy added. "He don't know anything. He isn't like Red. Red's a real rider. He's going to ride in the rodeo tomorrow. Are you, Andy?"

Andy licked his dry lips and shifted in the saddle. His Uncle Wes didn't like him to ride bucking horses. "Maybe," he said.

"I bet you don't," Tommy cried. "I bet you're scared."

Andy didn't answer. He was watching the storm, wondering whether they should ride on up the trail into the canyon. If there was a cloudburst among those chimneys, it might rip loose the soft volcanic rock, and send it tearing down the creek bed. He had seen it happen once, a year before. It was as though a giant had torn down a mountain. Andy could still feel the horror of it, the terror that gripped him when the little creek had turned into a foaming cauldron of mud and rock. It didn't happen often. The chances were a thousand to one it would not happen now, but if it did. . . .

Andy pulled up and the others followed his example. If he refused to take the Bennetts up the trail, he thought, they would complain about him more than ever.

Ahead of them, above the creek that poured out of the canyon mouth, he saw a grove of pines. It would be safe there, and a good place to have lunch. He turned in the saddle. Below him, the ranges fell away in great sagebrush-covered waves until they smoothed out at the bottom to let the river, shining like a knife blade, pour its way down the valley. "Gee," Andy thought. "Isn't that a pretty enough view for anybody? Why take a chance in the canyon?"

"I don't think we better go on up, Mr. Bennett," he said aloud.

"Well, for goodness' sake, why not?" Mr. Bennett pushed his stiff new Stetson back from his forehead. "What do you think we came up here for? That's the whole idea, to go up the canyon."

"I know, Mr. Bennett," Andy said respectfully. "But there's a thunderstorm up there and—"

"We're not afraid of a little rain," Mr. Bennett broke in. "We've all got slickers. Now don't be silly. Get going!" As a vice-president of a large corporation Mr. Bennett was used to giving the orders.

"I think you better let me explain first." Andy knew he should keep his temper. No matter what happened, the Ranch Boss said, the guest *must* be kept happy. "Sometimes these thunderstorms hit the peaks suddenly and squeeze out like a sponge. They turn loose so much water that it starts an avalanche."

"Nonsense," snapped Mr. Bennett. "If there was any danger, the ranch wouldn't have let us come."

"I bet Red wouldn't have tried to stop us," Tommy shouted. "He knows his stuff. He can ride anything and rope anything. He's no scaredy cat!"

Andy bit his lip. He was tired of Tommy—and of hearing about Red, the head horse wrangler. Red was the only roughneck on the ranch who made it hard for Andy. Red called him a dude, and tried to make fun of him in front of the guests.

"I don't know what Red would do," Andy said evenly. "But if we go up that canyon and there is a cloudburst, we might all be killed."

"I don't think you know what you're talking about." Mr. Bennett's sunburn grew redder than ever. "I'm leaving day after tomorrow. This is the one trail I haven't been over and I'm going to ride it today." He shook a chubby finger at Andy. "You admit you're nothing but a dude—inexperienced and untrained for this job. So there is no use in your trying to impress me with your great knowledge of the Rockies. Now let's get started."

Andy swallowed hard, trying to keep from getting angry. Mr. Bennett had spent thousands of dollars on the ranch; he was an important prospect for the following year. To disagree with him might cost Andy his job.

Mrs. Bennett took off a large pair of sunglasses and blinked mildly at her husband. "Now, John, don't lose your temper," she said. "The boy is only saying what he thinks best."

Mr. Bennett became angrier than ever. He argued with his wife, and grew so excited that he dropped a rein. Andy dismounted quietly, picked it up, and handed it to him.

Before remounting, he glanced at Sally. He could tell she was listening, although she leaned on the swells of her saddle and pretended to gaze across the ranges, hunting for stock. She was a real native; she had ridden every fold in the hills, and every creek bottom. She understood the risks. But Andy knew she would never butt in. He was the guide; it was his responsibility.

Finally, as he climbed into the saddle, Andy caught her attention. She gave him a level gaze with her blue eyes, and slowly nodded her yellow head, meaning, "You're

right, Andy. Stick to your guns. I'll back you up."

Andy grinned. Sally might kid him when things were going all right, but she never let him down, not when he really needed her.

"Aw shucks, Dad," Tommy shrilled. "Whatcha hol-lerin' about? The storm's gone away."

"Say, that's right." Mr. Bennett looked up the canyon and saw that the angry clouds were scattering, blowing into long wisps. "You're smart, Tommy," he went on. "Come on, Marvin. You can see for yourself it's all right now."

Andy shook his head. "I still don't think so," he said. "But let's get another opinion. Sally, here, has lived in these hills all her life. What do you think, Sally?"

Sally gave Mr. Bennett her sweetest smile. "I think Andy's right, sir," she said. "My dad always keeps out of creek beds and canyons in weather like this."

But Mr. Bennett still had his mind set on taking the trail. In business his word was law, and he simply couldn't stand being bossed by two youngsters. "That's very interesting, Miss Marvin," he said coldly. "I don't know your father, and anyway he's not guiding this trip. The ranch said the weather was fine. The storm has gone and—" he turned to Andy—"you will kindly lead us up the canyon trail."

"Sorry," Andy said, "but I'm afraid not."

Mr. Bennett turned almost purple. "Then we'll find it ourselves, Marvin," he said. "And on our return, I shall see that you're fired!"

Andy knew that this was the critical moment. He could feel Sally watching him, wondering what he would do. Well, he'd lose his job, then, but he'd bring his dudes home safely.

"O.K., Mr. Bennett," he said carefully. "You can report me when we get back. That's your privilege. But while we're still on the trail, I'm the guide. That means I'm boss. The chances are a hundred to one against a cloudburst, but it's my job to protect you against that one chance. I'll even go so far as to keep you from taking the trail."

As he spoke, Sunny felt the tension in the reins. The little sorrel pricked up his ears and spun halfway around, blocking the way. "All right, boss," he seemed to say. "I'm ready. How's for a little action?"

For a moment no one spoke. Mr. Bennett's bluff had been called. He knew he had no chance of getting his old dude plug around Sunny, a chunky little cow pony used to running calves. He glared at Andy furiously, trying to think of some way of beating him down, of making him obey.

"I want a drink of water," Tommy whined.

"Well, for goodness' sake, get off and get one," roared Mr. Bennett.

They were on a bluff near a gravel bank that dropped steeply to the creek—a mere brook in late August, rippling over the sunlit stones.

"Wait a minute," Andy said, as Tommy shinnied down the side of his Indian pony. "Better not go down there."

"Now what?" Mr. Bennett groaned. "From your vast

experience as a guide, is there some reason why a child should not drink water?"

"No." Andy looked up the canyon. All was serene. The quaking aspens clinging to the walls fluttered delicately in a tiny breeze. He saw a rock chuck ambling among the boulders. "It's just that if there *were* an avalanche—"

"Oh, stop being a grandmother!" Mr. Bennett yelled.

"O.K." Andy tried to smile. "But make it fast, Tommy." He turned toward Mr. Bennett. "There's a fine picnic spot in those pines up ahead," he said, pointing. "You'll have a lovely view of the valley. Then, after lunch if the weather is clear, we might still go up the trail away."

"That's very generous of you." Mr. Bennett spoke bitterly. "I hope you enjoy this expedition. It will be your last one—for the Dude Ranch."

Andy said nothing. He watched Tommy slide down the gravel bank. The boy worked his way to a point where the water curled into a little pool, lay down on his stomach, and started to drink.

The air was stifling, and only the ripple of the brook and the distant squawk of a magpie in the pines broke the silence. Andy, gazing along the mountain peaks, saw a golden eagle, his wings motionless, let the thermal currents carry him higher and higher over Bear Basin ridge.

He was about to point him out to the Bennetts, when he heard the thunder mutter again. He glanced up the canyon. There were no clouds now, yet the thunder kept rumbling. In fact it was growing louder. A deep angry roar

filled the air. The aspens up the canyon began to agitate wildly.

"Andy," Sally shouted. "Cloudburst!"

"Tommy!" Andy yelled, dropping off his horse. "Get out. Get out quick!"

But Tommy, head still in the pool, waved his hand without looking up. He had heard thunder all morning. It meant nothing to him.

Andy made the side of the gravel bank in two jumps. "Hurry, Tommy," he shouted. "Get out of there!"

Tommy looked at him inquiringly. But Andy didn't wait any longer. "Sally, get ready to grab him," he shouted over his shoulder, and slid down the steep bank to the creek bottom.

As he stumbled across the stones, he looked fearfully toward the canyon opening. It had disappeared. So had the aspens, the rock chuck—everything. In their place, a moving wall of angry brown water, forty feet high, filled the entrance with great boulders and trees as big as telephone poles.

Tommy, understanding at last, jumped to his feet, and he too saw the overwhelming mass bearing down on him. He ran across the slippery stones, staggered, and fell into the water.

Andy stumbled across the rocks, grabbed the boy, and pulling him to his feet, pushed him toward the bank. He felt the sudden rush of dank air against his neck. The roar of the avalanche rose higher, blotting out all sound, all



thought. They reached the bank, and Andy, grabbing Tommy by the seat of his pants, thrust the child upward desperately through the soft, slippery gravel.

2

Brownie, the Bronc

AT ANDY'S SHOUT, Sally jumped from her horse and ran to the edge of the bank. She tried to yell encouragement, but even Mrs. Bennett's scream was lost in the thunderous clamor. Dust from the canyon swept toward them like yellow smoke. Terrified, the horses shied away from the bank, nearly throwing their riders and leaving Sally alone, flat on her stomach, her hands reaching over to Tommy.

Tommy grabbed at them desperately. She felt his clammy fingers lock with hers, and she pulled with all her might.

Andy, pushing from below, watched the child's legs disappear from view and scrambled after them. He reached the top, and following Sally, raced for the nearest hill.

Reaching higher ground, he turned in time to see the wall of the avalanche, no longer confined by the canyon, rip out the entire creek bottom and spread out like a giant fan. Thick fingers of moving mud covered the gravel bank, coiled like oily snakes into every hollow, smothering the

sage and the willows, and changing the entire landscape in a few thunderous seconds.

Gradually, the roaring faded, although continuing in a lower key, as the water pushed on toward the river. Now that it was over, Andy felt his knees quaking and the cold sweat drenching his shirt. Slowly he turned and walked toward Sally.

"Are you all right, Sally?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, looking up at him with a shaky little smile.

"You're lucky," he said. "My knees rattle like hail on a tin roof. And I've got dudes to care for."

"Service with a smile," Sally answered grimly. "But don't worry, they're sitting up there in the pines. And I have an idea they won't criticize your guiding any more today."

They found Mrs. Bennett lying under a tree. Mr. Bennett had just returned from a nearby spring with a cup of water, one of those expensive collapsible cups, and he was shaking so hard that he held it with both hands to keep it from spilling. Only Tommy seemed to have recovered. Now that the action was over, he amused himself by throwing stones at his father's bright new Stetson, still lying out in the sagebrush.

"You folks take it easy," Andy said quietly, "while Sally and I rustle you up some coffee. Then you'll feel better."

They caught up the horses, and while Sally unpacked the lunches tied behind the saddles, Andy built a fire. Soon the older people were sipping coffee from steaming cups,

and gradually the color was coming back to their faces.

Finally, when lunch was finished, and they all lay sprawled comfortably in the shade, Mr. Bennett said, "I've got just two things to tell you kids. The first is simply thanks for saving my boy's life." He smiled wryly. "It sounds rather silly when I say it. But—but it comes from the bottom of my heart."

"And mine too," Mrs. Bennett added. "You have great courage."

"The second thing," went on Mr. Bennett, "is hard for an old man to say. But I want to apologize for being a stupid fool. You're a cracking good guide, Marvin. If you hadn't held us up, we would all have been killed."

Andy laughed. "Shucks, Mr. Bennett," he said. "I thought that after wrangling horses, dude guiding would be kind of dull. That shows you how much I know."

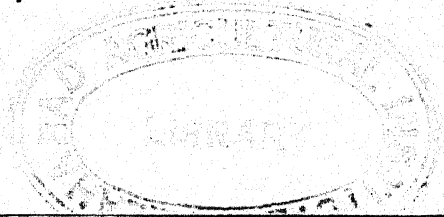
Mr. and Mrs. Bennett kept on thanking Andy and Sally until it became embarrassing. Even Tommy, under pressure, grudgingly admitted that Andy was no scare cat.

Finally, Mr. Bennett said, "Now, Mrs. Bennett and I have to show our thanks somehow. What would you two like? Can I buy you a couple of horses?"

Andy grinned. "I've got about the best mountain pony there is right now," he said, pointing to Sunny, who was grazing nearby with his reins down.

"So have I," Sally said, looking at Pint.

"Well, what would you like?" Mr. Bennett urged. "I have plenty of money, you know. It's high time I gave some of it away."



"Forget it," Andy said. "Some time when I'm in New York you can buy me a ticket to the rodeo."

"Why not ride in the rodeo parade?" Mr. Bennett said. "You're not old enough to ride in the show itself, but I know the people who run Madison Square Garden." He began to enjoy the idea. "Look, Andy," he said, "how would you like to have Sunny in New York and ride him in the rodeo?"

Andy's eyes lit up. "Well, I'm away at school most of the time," he said. "But . . . Geel!"

"It's a deal!" Mr. Bennett's face lit up. "We'll ship Sunny to New York at my expense. We'll keep him in a first-class stable all winter so you can ride him at the rodeo and during your vacations. Come spring, we'll ship him back out here."

Andy opened his mouth, but no sound came out. That had always been the trouble—leaving Sunny at the end of the summer. It darn near broke his heart. Now to have Sunny all winter. To ride him in Central Park. "Gosh . . . gee . . . thanks . . . I . . ." he muttered.

"That's that." Mr. Bennett was feeling better. "Now how about you?" he asked, turning to Sally. "What about that little bay horse there? Would he look nice right behind the band in the big parade?"

Sally just gazed at him, waiting to hear what was coming. "I've got to go to high school in town," she mumbled.

"Well, how about a long week end in New York?" Mr. Bennett was getting happier by the moment. Andy wondered why he had ever disliked him.

"Week end?" Sally asked, blinking at him dazedly.

"Sure," Mr. Bennett laughed. "Don't look as though I were crazy. We'll ship Pint in ahead. You can fly in for the last few days of the show. Andy can show you the town, and you can stay with us. How about it?"

"I guess Dad would let me," Sally said, her eyes glowing.

"Then it's all settled," said Mr. Bennett, climbing stiffly to his feet. "Let's go home, folks. I think Mrs. Bennett and I have had enough adventure for one day."

The morning of the rodeo dawned bright and clear, and Andy, working with the other men, cut out the bucking stock from the dude string on the range, and herded in a bunch of calves. Then finding himself free until the afternoon, he rode down to his Uncle Wes Marvin's ranch.

Something was bothering him and he wanted to get away where he could think about it. He pulled his saddle off, turned Sunny loose in the hay corral, and leaned on the fence watching the horses at the hayrack. He was remembering little Tommy's wisecrack of the day before—"Red can ride anything. Are *you* going to ride in the rodeo, Andy? I bet you're scared to!"

Sunny wandered over looking for oats, and Andy rubbed his inquiring nose absently. Sure he'd be scared all right. Who wouldn't be—riding an unknown bronc out of a chute for the first time? He'd be frightened, but he'd do it anyway. He knew he would. The trouble was that his Uncle Wes wouldn't let him try. His uncle was afraid he would get hurt just before going back to school. He per-

mitted Andy to ride Sunny in the calf-roping contest, but no bucking—that was out.

While Andy thought about it, he kept on scratching Sunny behind the ears, and soon two other horses ambled over demanding his attention. One, a lovely pinto colt, pretended to be terribly afraid, and jumped up and down on his springy legs like a pronghorn antelope. The other, a young gelding, was brown all over with no markings whatever.

Andy scratched the brown horse's neck, and wondered why Uncle Wes couldn't understand how hard it was for an Eastern boy to be a horse wrangler. Red kept making fun of him, telling the guests that he was really a dude, that this was only his second summer in Wyoming. "Shucks!" Andy thought, "I do my work! And some of his, too. But what will he say when the other wranglers buck out horses and I can't? Gee, I bet he'll razz me plenty in front of everybody!"

Andy climbed through the fence and walked across the corral. The two horses and the colt followed him, and somehow this made him feel better. "Maybe the cowboys don't like me much," he thought, "but the horses sure do." He wondered if he *could* ride a buck. Sunny'd bucked with him a couple of times, but that was different. He knew all of Sunny's tricks; it was just a kind of game they played when the air was cold and the little sorrel had a hump in his back.

Andy felt something nudge him. He turned and found the brown gelding's nose in his chest, snuffing for oats.

"Brownie," Andy said, pushing him away. "You are without a doubt the biggest baby in Wyoming. You act like an old pet work horse, and yet you've never been ridden . . . you've never even . . ." Andy stopped mumbling as an idea dawned on him.

Brownie was his horse. He was just a scrub, with no breeding, practically no withers, and a sway-back. Uncle Wes had brought him in last spring and had told Andy he could have him to fool around with. "The best way to learn about horses is to break 'em in yourself," he had said.

But Andy had been too busy to do more than feed the horse oats now and then and halterbreak him. Only once had he put a saddle on, and Brownie had just stood there with his legs spread, his big brown eyes gazing at Andy inquiringly. He was a hopeless pet, a no-good cayuse who would probably end up as a pack horse.

"But," Andy thought, "Uncle Wes said I could do the breaking. The horse has never been ridden, and even if he is gentle he might buck a little." Slowly a grin spread across Andy's face. If he topped off Brownie and stayed on, at least he would know in his own heart that he could ride. After all, the broncs in the rodeo were scrubs, too.

"Stick around," Andy said, pushing Brownie's head away. "I'll be back in a minute, and you and I can have this out once and for all."

Andy ran to the saddle house, picked up a hackamore and his saddle, and pulled them through the fence. He chased Sunny and the pinto colt through a gate into a smaller corral, then turned to face Brownie.

He wished the horse wasn't such a dopey-looking animal. He was a sissy! Instead of snorting and running away as a bronc should, he nearly knocked Andy down trying to get his head into the hackamore. To Brownie, this meant fun, and eventually a reward in oats.

Andy slipped the hackamore over the gelding's nose, tied him to the snubbing post in the middle of the corral, and gently slid the blanket and saddle across his back. Brownie's big, liquid eyes showed no sign of fear. He simply spraddled his legs, as though the strange thing on his back was heavy and rather uncomfortable. He didn't kick or snort; he just looked a little bit surprised.

Andy ran the latigo through the cinch ring and gradually pulled the cinch tight. Brownie grunted, but showed no alarm, no whites in his eyes. Andy wished deep down inside that Brownie would rear and fight a little, just to make it interesting.

Finally, the moment came to mount. Andy untied the hackamore reins and slipped them around the pony's neck. He reached for the pommel, and putting his left foot in the stirrup, tested the saddle to make sure it would not slip. Brownie lowered his head slightly, as though he didn't feel well and would like to lie down. Andy threw a little more weight in the stirrup, and was about to swing into the saddle when he heard Uncle Wes's voice from the far side of the corral.

"Hey, Andy! What are you doing?" Wes shouted, slipping between the rails.

Andy pulled his foot from the stirrup. Darn it! Why

did Uncle Wes have to pick this moment to show up—this one single instant just as he was about to mount?

"I'm giving Brownie a little workout," Andy said. "You told me I could, remember?"

"Sure." Uncle Wes, a mountain man, wise in the ways of horses, moved across the corral quietly so as not to excite the bronc.

"I thought it would be nice to ride him once before I went East," Andy said. "Just to see how he was."

"I guess you better not," Uncle Wes answered, and Andy felt his heart sink into his shoes.

"Why not?" he asked. "You *said* I could break him."

"Yep, I know." Wes put his hands on his hips and looked the horse over. "But that was early in the season, Andy. Before you got a job. You've done enough for one summer. I simply have to send you back to your dad in good shape."

"But, gee, Uncle Wes . . ." Andy felt it was unfair. If he was going to work with horses, he had to take his chances. "I'm a wrangler. At least I'm supposed to be one. I get paid. I can't always be a small boy protected from the big bad horses."

Uncle Wes laughed and dropped his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You've done a wonderful job, Andy," he said. "And you've learned fast. But you can't do everything in two summers. There's lots of time. And the one thing your dad made me promise was that you'd be back at school on time and in one piece. I'm sorry, but that's that."

Andy knew there was no use arguing with his uncle. But

he couldn't help one more try. "But Uncle Wes, he's just a pet. He's not like the bucking horses at the ranch. He follows me around like a dog."

"That's what oat feeding does," Uncle Wes said. "Sometimes it's a mistake. The horse loses respect for you and thinks *he's* the boss."

Andy was so disappointed that he turned away, dug his fists into his pockets, and started to leave the corral. Uncle Wes watched him, a smile of sympathy on his face.

"Wait a second, cowboy," he said kindly. "You know even if you rode this plug it wouldn't make you the World's Champion. Keep your shirt on, and I'll make a deal with you."

Uncle Wes's voice had such a sympathetic tone that Andy turned around and looked at him. "All right," he said reluctantly. "I—I didn't mean to be a bum sport. It's just that . . ." He wanted to tell his uncle about Red, and what a razzing he, Andy, would get when he couldn't ride a bronc. But, shucks, it was sissy to complain. He tried to grin. "O.K., Uncle Wes. What's the offer?"

"That's better," Wes said. "I'll tell you what, you let me top him off first. If he doesn't buck too hard, and I certainly don't think he will, you get him from then on."

"O.K.," Andy said without much enthusiasm. "I'll get your saddle, Uncle Wes."

When he returned from the barn, dragging his uncle's saddle, he found Sally leaning on the gate. "Gee, Andy," she said excitedly, "I guess we're going to have our own private rodeo first."

"Yeah," Andy grunted, passing the saddle over the bars to his uncle.

"What's the matter?" Sally saw instantly that Andy felt badly about something.

"Aw, it's just that . . . well, Brownie's my horse. I was supposed to break him myself and then— Oh, never mind, Sally. Let's skip it." Andy didn't look at her. He kept his eyes on his uncle, watching him slide the blanket across Brownie's back.

"I get it," Sally said quietly. "It's tough, Andy. But you'll get your chance. Dad'll only top him off."

Andy shrugged, as though he didn't really care.

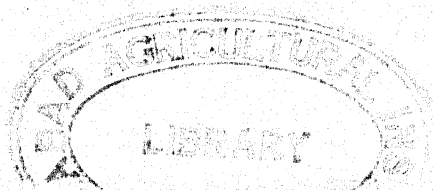
"Old Brownie won't buck much anyway," he said. "And even if he did, so what? Uncle Wes is the best darn rider in the valley." To watch an expert like Wes Marvin was a beautiful sight, and as Wes tested the saddle before mounting, Andy forgot to be angry. Even if he couldn't ride himself, it was a chance to learn.

Finally, Wes decided that the saddle would stay on the long back. He slipped a foot into the stirrup and, in a single motion, swung into the saddle.

Nothing happened. Brownie seemed to sag a bit in the middle, and he spread his legs a little wider as though to prop himself up.

"Wish I had my spurs on," Uncle Wes said, laughing. "This cayuse seems to be planted in the ground like a tree."

He kicked with his heels. Brownie heaved a little, but he didn't move his feet. Uncle Wes took off his hat and



fanned Brownie's ears, but the horse merely ducked his head.

Wes kicked shoulder and flank. He slapped with his hat; he shook the reins. Brownie simply stood there, ruminating like an old cow.

"I wonder if this horse is dead and we just don't realize it," Uncle Wes said, relaxing in the saddle. "Maybe if we got the tractor and towed him a while he'd—"

Perhaps Brownie knew he was being insulted. Possibly he had been turning the whole problem over in his mind. If so, he came to a sudden conclusion. With no warning, he bunched his legs, reared, then drove his head toward the ground like a pile driver.

Only Wes's split-second timing saved him that first jump, but he let out a whoop, waved his hat, and settled down to make a ride.

To Andy's amazement, Brownie snorted like a mad bull, and rearing high, came down so hard the ground shook. As he continued to buck, he seemed to gain confidence. To each jump he added more power, more drive.

Andy and Sally yelled like crazy people. "Ride him, cowboy! Pour it on him!" But Uncle Wes no longer raked with his heels at will. He was giving every ounce of energy toward just staying in that saddle, mastering the furious sunfishing twists, the snake-hipped wiggles, the thudding, pounding, hammering fury of a fighting bronco. Brownie followed an extra-hard buck with a high crooked kick that seemed almost to disconnect his hind legs from the rest

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UNCLE WES WAS GIVING EVERY OUNCE OF ENERGY TOWARD
JUST STAYING IN THE SADDLE

of his body—and when he finished it, Wes Marvin had lost a stirrup.

This only maddened Brownie further. He reared again and plowed the ground, battering Wes, fighting him, and thrashing the turf with thunderous hoofs.

Then it happened!

A sudden twist, a wicked kick, and Wes Marvin left the saddle, and flying sideways from the horse, he hit the ground with a dull, unmistakable thud.

Sally, followed by Andy, jammed through the gate and ran toward her father. "Dad!" She sank down by the crumpled figure lying motionless in the dirt. "Oh, Dad, are you hurt?"

Wes Marvin's body shivered, and his face rose out of the dust. He pulled himself to a sitting position and shook his head as though trying to clear it of shooting stars. Gradually the color came back to his sunburned cheeks—and with it a grin. "My mistake," he said, looking up at Andy ruefully. "I should have let *you* ride him!"

Sally, crouching beside him, felt her father's legs and arms, making sure he had no bones broken. "Lay off!" Uncle Wes grunted. "You hurt me worse than the horse did." He slid along the ground until he was leaning against a corral pole, then felt the back of his head gingerly. "That little pet of yours," he said to Andy, "has a bazooka in each leg. I wonder. Do you suppose there's anyone who would like to ride him up at the Dude Ranch this afternoon?"

Immediately Andy thought of Red, who boasted that

he could ride any bronc in the valley. "I think maybe so, Uncle Wes." Andy's eyes twinkled. "Anyway, I sure know a guy I'd like to see try!"

Scratch Him All the Way!

BY THE TIME Andy, Sally, and Uncle Wes rode into the Dude Ranch that afternoon, they could hear the show already in progress. They tied their horses, including Brownie, to the hitching rail, and walked across the empty yard.

"Aren't you going to put Brownie in with the other buckers?" Andy asked his uncle.

Wes shook his head and winked. "Brownie mustn't crash the party," he said. "He has to wait till he's invited."

They passed a number of cars with trailers attached, belonging to buyers who had come looking for good rope horses and buckers, and when they finally reached the rodeo, Andy thought it was like walking into the middle of a Technicolor movie.

Every inch of the big corral was lined with guests wearing wildly colored shirts and vivid scarfs. Their belts glittered with silver conchos and even their boots, hooked in the fence rails, were brilliant exhibits of inlaid butterfly designs.

Andy and Sally found a place on the fence near the

chutes from which the buckers were turned loose and, climbing to the top, they watched the events in progress. The dude kids were running about the corral trying to rope young calves almost as big as they were, while parents cheered, laughed, and shouted encouragement.

Andy tried to take an interest, but his gaze kept wandering across the chutes to the smaller corrals where the stock was being worked, the calves cut out for roping, and the broncs separated from the wrangle horses. That was where he belonged, he thought, not sitting here like a dude, watching the children play. He wasn't such a bad roper, and at least he could work a gate while cutting out horses, but Red, his immediate boss, had said he wasn't needed, that he would only be in the way.

"Just wait till we get to the calf roping," Andy thought, grimly. "Sunny and I'll show 'em!"

At that moment the Big Boss of the ranch, impressive in his red shirt and frontier pants, walked to the middle of the arena and, raising his hand, called for silence. The crowd quieted. Somewhere a horse blew dust from his nostrils, and a bronc pawed the gate of a chute as the men dropped a saddle on his back. Here was a main event—saddle bucking coming up!

"I don't know how much you people know about rodeo rules," the Big Boss said. "But the next event, saddle-bronc riding, has a lot of them and here are a few of the most important. As each horse leaves the chute, the rider must spur him high on the shoulders. He must keep one hand free at all times, and must not change hands on the rein

or wrap the rein around his hand. Of course, he must not pull leather, and the more he spurs his horse during the ride, the higher his score will be. But remember, folks, that the bronc gets credit for his performance, too—the wilder, the better. The judges rate the horse and the rider separately, each on a basis of a hundred per cent, then they add the two scores together and this decides the rider's final rating."

The Big Boss drew a pistol from a holster at his belt and pulled the stop watch from his pocket. "Now when the first rider comes out," he said, "I time him. At the end of ten seconds, I fire the gun. After that, the cowboy can hit the dirt, or let the pickup riders help him off his bronc."

He started for the side of the corral, then paused. "One more thing," he added. "We've got a pretty fine rider here. You all know Red, my head wrangler." The crowd applauded. "Tomorrow he's going to hit the rodeo trail. So when you get back East, watch out for him. I've a hunch he'll turn up at Madison Square Garden. Red, come out and take a bow."

Red strode into the arena. With his bull chest, narrow hips, and slim muscular legs, he was a swaggering figure of a man. As he swept off his big white Stetson, the green silk neckerchief around his throat contrasted vividly with his bright red hair. Again, the dudes clapped and yelled. Red waved his hat, and swaggered over to the chutes.

"Jimmy Watson coming out on Warhorse!" yelled the Big Boss. The pickup men, riding quiet, well-trained cow

ponies, moved to the side of the arena, the chute gate opened, and a bronc burst out, with Jimmy on his back doing his best to scratch him all the way. The crowd yelled, the horse plunged, but the boy stuck on until the Boss fired his gun. Then the pickup men rode up on each side of the bronc, and while one grabbed the rein, the other helped Jimmy to slide across his cow pony, behind the saddle, and slip to the ground.

Andy thought it was a good amateur show. The riders were local boys, and the buckers, fresh off the range, were flank cinched to make them do their best. But Andy noticed that most of them bucked straight ahead, with no twists, no sunfishing to throw the riders off balance. Were they really so much harder to sit than Sunny on a cold morning in spring? It didn't look so to him. He thought he might have stuck on one of them, might have proved that he could hold his own with the rest of the cowboys—if only Uncle Wes would give him the chance.

Finally, Red was announced, and although he rode a horse well known locally for his orneriness, the bronc hardly gave him a ride. Even after the gun went off, he waved the pickup men away and continued the show. He pulled the horse's head up, rode him around the arena, then fanned the animal with his hat, and made him buck a few more jumps. "Look," he shouted, trotting the pony in a circle, "I've got him broke for dudes." Then he stuck him with the spurs, making him crowhop. It was a pretty exhibition, Andy thought, but pure show-off, and continued for too long.

The crowd applauded, but Andy had a feeling that they, too, were a little fed up, a little tired of watching a good man make fun of a poor horse.

Finally, Red dismounted. "Say, Boss," he yelled, making sure every guest heard him. "How about a reride? This bronc's a cream puff."

The Boss looked at him and grinned. He was proud of his wrangler. The dudes would go back East and boast about him, and that was good for business. "Haven't got but one horse left," he said. "Old Cannonball. He isn't much."

"I'll say he ain't," Red said. "Is that the best you can do, Baldy?" he yelled at the corral boss over by the chutes.

"That's all we got," Baldy answered.

Andy saw his uncle wave at the Big Boss and point toward the hitching rail. "I've got a pony over there," he said mildly, almost apologetically. "He pitches a little."

Red and the Big Boss looked up at him. "You think he's any good?" Red asked.

"He bucks," Wes said, modestly.

"O.K. Go get him!" Red said. "I'll ride his legs down to nubs."

"I hope you won't hurt him," Wes said, climbing down the fence. "He's kind of young."

"Thanks, Marvin," the Big Boss said. "We can use another horse. But meantime, who's going to ride old Cannonball?"

Nobody made an offer. All the wranglers had bucked out their horses and as it was not a real contest but only an

exhibition for the dudes, they were not anxious to ride again.

Suddenly, Red noticed Andy sitting on the fence. "What's the matter with our dude kid?" he asked. "Ain't he got guts enough to ride?"

Andy saw every eye in the crowd turn on him. He felt as though someone had punched him in the stomach.

The Boss looked at him kindly. "He doesn't have to ride," he said. "He may come from the East, but he's done a mighty good job for me this summer."

Some of the guests applauded, and Andy blushed. Darn it! Why couldn't they leave him alone?

"Well, why not let him ride old Cannonball, then?" Red asked. "He ain't a killer or nothing. It won't hurt the kid to hit the dirt once. Do him good!"

Andy, clutching the corral rail, swallowed hard. Now maybe Uncle Wes would see what he had been going through. He glanced at his uncle, who had started to get Brownie from the hitching rail. Wes stopped, spun on his heel, and was back up the fence in three jumps.

He leaned forward waving a finger at Red. "Andy may be a dude," he shouted. "But he's no show-off. He'll ride your bronc for you." He swung on Andy. "You don't have to take any more talk like that, boy," he growled. "Go on down there. Take a short hold, a deep seat, and scratch him all the way."

At first Andy felt a wave of happiness, but as he dropped from the fence, the eagerness drained out of him. Now that the horse was ready, the crowd waiting, he needed

time to think, to screw up his courage—and there was no time. His breath came fast, his heart pounded, and way down deep inside himself he realized that he didn't want to ride in front of all these people. He was scared—plumb frightened!

A hand grasped his arm, and looking up, he saw Sally in front of him.

"Go get 'em, Andy!" she whispered. "And don't worry. It doesn't matter whether you get pitched off or not. Every good cowboy gets piled up, sometimes. Just scratch him, Andy. Give him the works!"

Andy straightened his shoulders. Sally always knew the right thing to say. Shucks! Suppose he did fall off! What of it?

"Thanks, Sally," he said. "I'll try, pal." He grinned at her, and climbed up to the top of the chute, which resembled a large oblong crate with a gate at one end. Below him he could see Cannonball's back, and hear the animal's hoof pawing the slats. A wise old horse, Cannonball knew what was expected of him, and the feel of the flank cinch made him anxious to get it over.

Andy, poised above the saddle, tried to remember everything that his uncle had ever told him about bucking. You should sit well back, he remembered, with your feet deep in the stirrups, so that when the horse's head went down you would have a straight spine and not pitch forward. "Try to figure out which way the horse will jump next," his Uncle Wes had told him. "Guess ahead, so that your balance will be ready." What else? Andy couldn't think of

anything. He could hear the crowd getting restless. There was no more time to think, no chance to stall.

"Let's go, kid!" He looked down and saw Baldy ready to open the gate. "This old cayuse ain't nothin', Andy," he said. "Why, ole Sunny can buck harder'n him."

Realizing that he must look scared, Andy nodded, tried to smile, and dropped into the chute.

He felt his legs slide down the horse's sides into the stirrups, and finding the leathers a bit long, he asked the men to shorten them one notch.

While he waited, he did his best to forget the squeamish feeling in his stomach by giving himself a fight talk. "Dog-gone it! Don't let Red give you the horse laugh. This is it—the one chance to show 'em. You've got to scratch him—all the way."

He settled his chaps, and pushed the stirrups forward to get his spurs close to the horse's shoulders, and took a firm grip on the rein.

He heard a voice, a dry little voice that he realized was his own, say "O.K., Baldy. Open up!"

Baldy waved a hand. Andy felt the old bronc under him tense his muscles. For a moment the whole world stood still. Then he heard the Boss yell, "Andy Marvin coming out of Chute Number Two on *Cannonball!*"

Baldy swung the gate open wide.



Baby-faced Bucker

FOR A SPLIT SECOND Cannonball failed to move; then, reaching forward with his spurs, Andy raked him on the shoulders. The bronc's head went down, and something hit the base of Andy's spine, shaking him to the top of his scalp. He forgot all about scratching the horse, leaning back, or figuring out the next jump. He just hung on, taking the jolts that nearly knocked his teeth out. He tried to clutch the slippery leather between his legs. He clung to the rein in his hand, but he felt as though his bones were breaking, chipping off one by one. His muscles shook like jelly and each buck kicked him higher out of the saddle.

Then came the twisting jump, and Andy felt a stirrup disappear. He began to slide to the left. Desperately he tried to pull himself back by the rein, then his other stirrup vanished. He was going; he was slipping, and suddenly he didn't care. He knew he was falling off; he couldn't stop it. It had to happen.

The ground rose up to meet him. It crashed into his face; the wind went out of his lungs, and the whole world swirled into blackness.



HE KNEW HE WAS FALLING OFF; HE COULDN'T STOP IT

The next thing he remembered, someone was reaching under his arms and pulling him to a sitting position. The mountains, the blue sky, the colorful dudes on the fence appeared before him, spinning like a giant pinwheel that gradually slowed down until the corral fell into place before his eyes.

"Good ride, kid," a voice said, and pulling himself to his feet, Andy saw the Big Boss grinning at him.

"Good ride, my foot!" Andy gasped, rubbing the corral dust from his eyes. Now that his wind was returning, he realized that he had let the Boss down, a man who prided himself on his riders. And he'd been piled up in front of Uncle Wes, too, and . . . and Sally! He had wanted to show her most of all that he was no longer a dude but a real hand, a top rider. "I flew higher than a kite," he mumbled.

"What of it?" the Boss said. "You rode him first. You didn't lose your stirrup until after I fired the gun."

"Gun?" Andy mumbled, trying to shake the pain out of his head.

"Sure," the Boss answered, pushing him out into the middle of the corral. "You scratched him twice and rode him all the way. After the gun goes, who cares whether you fall off or not? Get out there and take a bow."

Then for the first time Andy realized that the crowd was applauding. In front of him he saw Uncle Wes shaking his hands over his head like a prize fighter, and Sally yelling as though she were crazy. Over the clapping hands he heard Mr. Bennett shout, "There he is, that's my boy!"

Andy felt the color coming back into his cheeks, and bowing awkwardly, he retrieved his hat and hurried for the gate. Just as he reached it, Red appeared leading Brownie. "Not a bad ride, sonny boy," the horse wrangler said. "Stay with it for another ten years and you'll be O.K." Andy didn't answer. He just patted Brownie, and the horse looked at him knowingly with his soft brown eyes.

When Andy climbed up beside Sally and Uncle Wes, they pounded him on the back, congratulating him, and he decided that for him bucking was like having an aching tooth pulled—wonderful when it was all over and done with.

Because he was so gentle, Brownie was led into the chute from the front, and even Baldy began to make cracks about him. "This one's going to work you over, Red," he yelled. "He sure is the wildest bronc ever to escape the horse-meat factory."

Red stood in the corral grinning. "I'm a-scairt this time, Baldy," he said. "If this killer does me in, you can have my best boots."

The dudes laughed, and Andy began to wonder whether Brownie would buck again. Having blown up once that day and with the saltiness taken out of him, he might not try so hard the second time. And, gee, how would Uncle Wes feel after falling off the horse himself?

He glanced at Uncle Wes who was just smiling to himself. "Hey, Wes!" the Big Boss called. "What do you call this bombshell of yours?"

"His name's Baby Face," Uncle Wes answered.

The crowd chuckled again, and Red climbed the chute, spread his legs, and dropped into the saddle. "Come on, boys," he shouted. "What are we waitin' for? This pony's got some plowin' to do tomorrow."

"Red Wilson coming out of Chute Number Two on Baby Face," shouted the Boss.

The gate swung open.

Having thrown one man with great success, Brownie didn't waste any time thinking it over. He thoroughly disliked the flank cinch, and when for the first time in his life he felt the sharp prick of spurs, he unwound like a spring.

He didn't buck straight out. Every jump had a new twist. The first one sent a surprised Red forward over the saddle horn, the second one loosened him up, and the third sent him flying.

That was all there was to it. When Red hit the ground, Brownie stopped pitching and waited patiently while they took the saddle off. Once again he looked sweet and kind—a gentle, brown-eyed baby face.

While Red slowly got to his feet, the crowd applauded politely amidst a number of chuckles. But this time he didn't take a bow, and as he slipped through the fence his face was almost as crimson as his hair.

Andy looked at his uncle, but Wes Marvin wasn't even smiling, just gazing dreamily at the farthest mountain peak. If you didn't know him, Andy thought, if you didn't understand the meaning of those tiny crinkles around his

eyes, you could never have told that he was laughing fit to bust inside.

"You want to sell that horse back to me?" Wes asked casually.

"Why?" Andy said. "What do you want him for?"

"I've got a hunch," Wes said, "that you own a great buckner. If so, he's worth quite a piece of change."

A few minutes later when Andy, Sally, and Uncle Wes were riding toward the pasture for the calf roping, following a crowd of dudes streaming across the field, Red pulled up his horse in front of them.

"Where'd you get that outlaw?" he asked Wes.

"He's just a four-year-old bronc," Wes smiled at Red. "He belongs to Andy."

"Whyn't you tell me he was so tough?" Red growled. "You got me bucked off in front of them dudes. If I'da known, I'da rode him more careful."

"Every cowboy hits the dirt once in a while," Wes said mildly.

"That wasn't no contest." Red's voice was hard. "You made a fool of me, Marvin. I just want to tell you you ain't goin' to get away with it."

Uncle Wes stopped smiling. "You made a fool of yourself," he said. "And you tried to make a fool of Andy. Now you got bucked off, didn't you? Maybe you don't ride quite as well as you thought."

Red's eyes narrowed. "I won't forget this, Marvin," he said. "If things start to happen, don't say I didn't warn

you." He turned his horse and galloped across the field.

Sally threw a worried glance at her father. "What'll he do, Dad?" she asked.

Uncle Wes grinned. "Just big talk, most likely," he said. "That kid's a mighty good rider. Old Brownie did him a favor piling him up. Next time he won't be so overconfident."

Although Uncle Wes looked unworried, Andy wondered whether the warning was just a bluff. Did Red really mean to make trouble? Andy thought he was the kind of man who could bear a grudge for a long time.

But the calf roping made Andy forget all about Red's threat. Although they had roped everything in sight from fence posts to pigs, Andy and Sunny had never entered a contest before.

The dudes had formed a double line across the meadow, making a wide lane running from the corral filled with bawling calves to the farther fence. Pulling his sorrel up near the starting line, Andy listened as the Big Boss once again spoke to his guests.

"Now folks," he shouted. "You're going to see one of the most exciting contests in rodeo, and one that not only shows up the skill of the cowboy but the training and intelligence of his horse!" Andy rubbed Sunny's neck. This was what he loved about roping. He and Sunny could work as a team. "This is a race against time," the Boss went on. "As the calf crosses the starting line, the cowboy takes after it, and is allowed two tries with his rope. When he has caught his calf, he must jump from his horse, go down the

rope and cross-tie three of the calf's legs. When he signals that he has completed his tie, the judge holding the flag will drop it, the cowboy's time will be recorded and his knot inspected." He turned to the ropers sitting on their horses near the corral. "Don't jump the barrier, boys," he said, "and no busting." Andy knew that this meant he must not let Sunny cross the chalk line until the calf had passed it, and that when he caught the calf he was not allowed to let his horse throw or drag the animal. He had to dismount and toss the calf by hand. He didn't know much about the technique of doing this. "But shucks," he thought. "I know a lot about wrestling."

"One more thing," the Boss yelled. "It gives me great pleasure to announce that the tie judge for this contest is one of the greatest figures in professional rodeo today, a man who has won first money at saddle-bronc riding in some of the biggest shows in the country—Mr. Shorty Franklin." The dudes applauded, and a little bowlegged fellow at the far end of the field waved a battered hat at the crowd.

All the ropers were local boys, and although most of them did well, Andy thought their horses were poorly trained. Some of them slacked up on the rope at the critical moment, letting the calf run out of the contestant's reach. Other horses dragged the calf or threw it, or refused to stand while the cowboy tied his knot.

Finally, he heard the Big Boss call his name. Walking Sunny alongside the corral, well behind the chalk line, he took down his rope and carefully shook out his loop. From

under his belt he took the tie rope, called a piggin string, and loosening it, he put it in his mouth, gripping it between his teeth.

He was as tense now as when he had dropped into the bucking chute, and Sunny felt the tautness in the reins. He heard the bawling calves, too, and saw his master shake out the loop. He was so excited that his feet danced, he pawed the ground, and his muscles bunched like giant watch springs. Calf roping! This was what he loved.

But Andy mumbled at him through the piggin string. He was afraid the sorrel would cross the barrier too soon and patting the pony's neck, he held him back.

Sunny's ears flipped around, listening, trying to understand, and gradually he quieted down. Andy nodded to the man at the gate. It swung open and a big calf was hazed across the line.

Andy leaned forward in the saddle and Sunny, exploding like a high-powered bullet, dove after his critter.

5

The Disappearing Bronc

SUNNY RAN WITH his head straight out, bearing down on the calf like a streak of yellow lightning. Andy felt a great surge of joy. This was riding! He and Sunny were a team, working together with only one idea. *Get that calf!*

When Andy started swinging his loop, the calf tried to turn to the left, but Sunny ducked with him, and as the little horse drew nearer, Andy rose in his stirrups and let the loop shoot out. The rope sizzled through his fingers, the loop settled over the calf's head, and before Sunny could stop, Andy was out of the saddle.

Running down the rope, Andy knew he was making the best time in the contest. It was almost a professional job, and Sunny was holding his calf like a top Quarter Horse, not busting him and not giving him any slack either.

Andy threw himself at the calf, reaching for the head. But the calf, big and tough, swung around, pulling Andy with him. Andy tried to grab its feet to get the piggin string around them. It kicked the rope free. Andy grabbed at the head again, but the critter broke away, bawling as though



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ANDY THREW HIMSELF AT THE CALF, REACHING FOR THE HEAD

its last minute had come, and Sunny, patiently trying to help, took up the slack to give Andy another chance.

Andy was panting now. He rushed the calf angrily, trying by the full force of his weight to knock it over. But the animal was heavy—and time was passing, the seconds ticking away.

He never did remember how he finally got the calf down and the three legs roped together. It seemed to take forever, and when at last he signaled that he had made the tie, the calf shook the piggin string loose before the judge could inspect it.

Andy was so winded that he sat there in the dirt, his face covered with dust and his shirttail around his neck. Finally, realizing how funny he must look, he started to laugh.

He heard good-humored applause mixed with wisecracks from the crowd. But he didn't care. Sunny had done his job perfectly, and before they entered another contest, he would get Uncle Wes to show him the right way to throw a critter.

Climbing to his feet, he hobbled toward Sunny, and heard the Boss announce that Red Wilson had won the contest. Sunny was looking at him inquiringly as if to say, "Did I do something wrong, boss?"

Andy coiled his rope and rubbed Sunny's nose. "It certainly wasn't *your* fault," he murmured. "And I'll do better next time."

"Say!" a voice behind him said. "Did you train that pony yourself?"

Turning, Andy saw a slender little man hobbling toward him, and he realized it must be Shorty Franklin, the famous rodeo rider.

"He had some training when I bought him," Andy said. "But I've worked on him a lot since."

"Well, you sure done a good job." Shorty was walking around Sunny, studying him, taking in every detail, noticing the trim legs and the short back. Andy was delighted. Here was a famous cowboy, a man who had ridden and roped in the biggest rodeos in America, taking time out to admire Sunny!

When he had finished, Shorty took off his battered hat, wiped the stained sweatband and put it on again. "Red Wilson tells me you're a dude," he said.

Andy winced. "Uh—huh."

Shorty smiled. "I'da known it anyway," he said. "The way you tried to throw that calf. You can't butt 'em down like you was a goat."

Andy laughed. "You're not kidding," he said. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Franklin, I've never tried to do it before. I've roped everything in sight, but I just had to take a chance on making the tie."

"Well," Shorty hitched his belt and looked Andy over from top to toe. "That ain't so bad, then. I think if I had a chance I could make a roper out of you. I'll give you one hint right now."

"I sure would like any advice you could give me," Andy said.

"Well, first I'd throw away that shirt." Shorty looked at it critically.

"Why?" Andy was surprised.

"It pulled up around your shoulders," Shorty said. "It tried to stop you wastlin' that calf."

Andy laughed. "I guess I just didn't tuck it in far enough, Mr. Franklin. It's the same kind of shirt you're wearing. Just cotton blue denim."

But Shorty was serious. "I know," he said. "I got lots of them shirts. But there's only one I'd wear roping."

"Is it different from the others?"

"It don't *look* different." Shorty suddenly seemed embarrassed. "Maybe you'll think I'm loco," the little cowboy went on. "An' I wouldn't tell you this except I've kind of taken a shine to you. But my ropin' shirt just naturally brings me luck. I wouldn't wear any other one—not when I'm ropin'."

Andy had heard about rodeo cowboy superstitions that certain bits of clothing were supposed to bring luck. He decided not to laugh at Shorty Franklin even though it seemed silly about the shirt.

Shorty was watching the crowd leaving the field. "I've known a piece of clothing to bring awful bad luck," he said. "I had me a new belt once. One day I was ridin' for final money at Pendleton. I wore that belt. The horse fell on me and broke my hip. When I got well, I still wore that belt, and darned if I didn't have a hundred dollars stole from me." He turned and looked at Andy gloomily. "If

you don't get rid of that shirt," he said, "you might be in trouble before dark."

Andy couldn't help smiling. "Gosh, Mr. Franklin," he said, as they started toward the ranch buildings. "I can't walk around a dude ranch without a shirt. The Boss just wouldn't stand for it."

Hobbling along, Shorty began to shake off his look of melancholy. "Well," he said, "I guess working on a dude ranch you got trouble no matter what you wear." He looked back at the sorrel. "But you ain't got much use for a rope horse, ridin' dudes, have you? Why don't you sell that pony to me? I'll give you a good price for him."

Andy shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Franklin," he said. "Sunny is not for sale."

"Not at any price?"

"Not at any price. Do you buy a lot of horses?"

"Well, I buy a few now and then for Burnam and Williams, the rodeo stock ranch."

Andy remembered what Uncle Wes had said about Brownie. "Did you see that bronc that pitched Red Wilson off this afternoon?" he asked.

"Nope, didn't get here soon enough. But that boy can ride. It must be a salty pony."

"He is," Andy said excitedly. "He bucked my Uncle Wes off this morning, and he piled up Red in three jumps. He's really hot, and he belongs to me. If you're buying buckers, he's one you'll want to look at."

"Why sure," Shorty said. "If he's sound, I'll buy him."

They were interrupted by a yell from the corrals.

"Hey, dude!" Red Wilson was beckoning Andy. "Got some stock to run across the river. Get a move on."

Shorty looked up quickly. "Calls you dude out loud, huh?" he said.

"Oh, he's mad at me and Uncle Wes," Andy answered. "Our horse shook him loose in front of all the girls. But he's the boss, Mr. Franklin. I've got to run that stock onto the range, and I'll be back for supper."

"O.K., kid. I'll ride the grub line, too. After we've et, we'll get together and have a look at your bronc."

It took Andy an hour to put the horses across the river and then return to the ranch and eat, and by the time he and Shorty started for the corrals, the sun had dropped behind the peaks, and tatters of red cloud were strung across the evening sky.

"Why aren't you riding in the rodeos now?" Andy asked.

"I been ridin'. But I sprained my leg for the fourth time, and twisted my back some, so I'm takin' a couple of days off. Did you know Red Wilson's hit the rodeo trail?"

"Red's quit?" Andy was surprised. The season was not far along, and with all the tips from the guests, Red made good money.

"Yep," Shorty said. "Him and Chet Myers bought up all the broncs for sale except yours and pulled out just before you got back."

Reaching the corral where the extra ponies were held, Andy looked around for Brownie. He knew that this was

where the buckers had been put after the contest. He saw the wrangle string and the work horses munching hay at the rack. But although he climbed the fence and looked them over carefully, he saw no sign of his bronc.

Andy felt a prickling sensation run up his spine. He didn't say anything. He just walked around the corral and made sure.

"What color was he?" Shorty asked, as though he knew exactly what Andy was thinking. "What markings?"

Andy tried to think of ways to identify Brownie. He simply had no markings. He was the most undistinguished-looking horse you could imagine—no white feet, no blaze, not even any shadings in color.

"Gosh, Shorty," he said, "he hasn't any. I'll bet that Red turned him loose or did something with him. He told Uncle Wes he was going to make trouble."

"He did, huh? What was the pony's brand?"

"Ours. Lazy TP on the left shoulder."

"Was he low in the withers and kind of snake-bellied?"

"Well, yes, I guess you could say he was."

"I think Red drove him out of here with the rest of the bunch a half hour ago."

Andy's eyes narrowed. Red had made life hard for him, calling him dude in front of the guests and giving him jobs that no one else wanted. But taking it out on Brownie—that was different. Would he maltreat the little bronc?

Andy clenched his fists. "Red's kind of mean to stock sometimes," he growled. "And he's sore at me and Uncle Wes. He might kill Brownie."

Shorty shook his head. "Nope, he won't do that," he said. "Not if the horse can buck like you say he can. He's worth cash on the barrel head, once they get him out of the country."

Andy pulled up his belt a notch. "Well, jumpin' juniper, he's not going to leave this valley," he said angrily. "Not while Sunny and I can still stop him. Which way did they go?"

"Down river. Must be fifteen head in the bunch. But you can't go kyootin' off in the dark. You'll get lost."

"Not me," Andy shouted, running for the barn where Sunny was finishing a quart of oats. "And if I do, Sunny'll bring me home."

Andy slipped Sunny's bridle on, and heaved the saddle across his back. If Red had only a half hour's start and was running fifteen head, there was a chance to catch him before he hit the high hills.

"Did Red say where he was going?" Andy asked, tightening the cinch and adjusting the slicker tied to the back of his saddle.

"No, he didn't," Shorty answered. "But look, kid, you think you ought to—"

"Don't worry, Shorty," Andy said, climbing into the saddle. "I've ridden most of this country. I know I'm a dude, but I don't take unnecessary chances. I'll be O.K. And I'll bring back the best buckner you ever saw."

"Before you go, kid," Shorty said. "There's just one thing."

Andy was ready, and Sunny felt the tension in the reins.

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The boss was excited. Something was up. He bunched his feet ready to make a break.

"What is it, Shorty?" Andy asked. "Hurry up! Every minute counts. Can't you see it's getting dark?"

"Sure. I know that. Remember what I told you about trouble before sunset. Now won't you please change that shirt? I'll give you mine."

"Haven't time, Shorty. But thanks just the same, and call Uncle Wes and Sally, won't you?"

"O.K.," Shorty said sadly. "It's your funeral. Stay in the saddle, cowboy!"

Andy waved, spun Sunny around, and loped through the gate.

6

The Trail to Hardpan Mesa

HE PICKED UP the trail on the main road, and ran Sunny hard. This was where he could make time. After his long, dusty day around the corrals, the wind blowing through his shirt felt almost like a cool shower. Above him the silver disk of a full moon riding the darkening sky told him he would have enough light to keep on the trail for several hours.

He was still too full of anger at Red Wilson to worry about what he would do when he caught up to the big horse wrangler. He thought the man must be stupid to steal a well-known horse right off the Dude Ranch. Wyoming law still demanded a year in jail for horse rustling, and Andy intended to find Brownie before he could be resold or have his brand blotted.

Suddenly he pulled Sunny down on his haunches and examined the road in front of him. Red had turned off somewhere—the tracks had disappeared. Turning Sunny, he walked him back, retracing his steps until he came to a wire gate.

There they were, hoofprints plain as day! The horses

had been pushed through the gate and up toward the towering height of Hardpan Mesa.

Andy had never been to the top of Hardpan but, having studied the Geological Survey maps of the country, he knew that above the rimrock was a wide plateau. If you crossed it, you could find a trail down the farther side that led to the main arterial road on the North Fork.

While giving Sunny a chance to catch his breath, he looked across the range at the steep sides of the mesa. Why would a man start horses up there at night? The cliffs looked ominous in the deepening shadows, and above them he could see a dark line of forest, an easy place to lose horses if they wandered off the trail in the dark. And an easier place for an inexperienced dude to get in trouble!

Andy thought Red was deliberately hitting tough country, trying to shake off pursuit. Looking at the wilderness ahead of him, he wondered whether, after all, it wouldn't be better to turn back. He might be able to find Brownie later on—and, anyway, was the little buckner so important? It wasn't as though Sunny had been stolen—he would risk his life for Sunny any time.

Yet Brownie was worth money, and he would help swell the savings account that Andy had started to buy a stock ranch of his own someday. Andy sat his horse, trying to decide what to do, and suddenly he remembered the sneer on Red Wilson's face when he yelled, "Hey, dude!" The words rang through Andy's head. Red didn't think

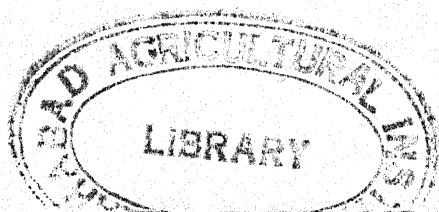
him capable of trailing, of climbing Hardpan Mesa at night, or of putting up a scrap for his bronc.

"Let's go, Sunny," he growled, and touching the sorrel with his spurs, Andy headed him toward the deepening twilight of the mountains.

Although the trail was rough and climbed steeply, it was easy going at first. Andy could follow the tracks of the other horses, and Sunny, well stocked with oats, plugged ahead tirelessly. The more he thought about it the surer Andy was that he was doing the right thing. Red must have figured he could not only lose a pursuer by short-cutting over Hardpan, but could save time, arriving at the North Fork highway by the next noon at the latest. It would be easy then to get Brownie out of the country, blot the brand, and sell him for a good price to some rodeo stock ranch. Andy decided he must catch them before they hit the road—or Brownie would be gone forever.

Gradually the trail grew rougher until it was not much more than an elk trace. Sunny scrambled over boulders almost as big as he was, and even jumped uphill over fallen tree trunks, and time after time Andy dismounted to search for the elusive tracks of Red Wilson's horses. Finally, after an hour of the steepest climbing Andy had ever done on horseback, they entered a clump of trees clinging to the side of the mesa. The trail was unblazed, the moonlight was filtered away by the surrounding pines—and once and for all the tracks disappeared.

Andy dismounted and sat on a stump, Sunny's reins in



his hand. Now what? Looking back the way he had come, he knew he wouldn't dare lead Sunny down again through that jumble of rocks at night. He realized that he was what the mountain men called rimrocked. Either he had to take a chance on scrambling to the top, or stay where he was until morning.

"If Red Wilson can drive horses up here at night," he thought, "Sunny and I can make it," and wearily, leading the little sorrel, he started clambering upward.

But weaving his way up through gaps in the rimrock, over juniper bushes, and across deep gullies, Andy soon lost his wind and climbed back into the saddle. He made no attempt to hunt for a trail now, and Sunny, anxious to get off the dangerous mountainside, lunged on, humping his back, jumping, scrambling, fighting his way across treacherous rockslides like a bighorn sheep.

The moon was low by the time Sunny, blowing like a porpoise, pulled over the top of the mesa. But looking down, Andy saw that its light still silvered the river and gave the cliffs, the long draws, the dry gulches, and the rolling ranges a strange, unreal appearance. Because the soft glow hid detail, it seemed to Andy as though they had hardly come any distance at all, and that with one jump he and Sunny could float back into the valley and be home in half an hour.

But Sunny spoiled the illusion. He stood with his head down, his ears low, blowing and groaning with the efforts he had made, and his shining coat was blurred with dark rings of sweat.

Andy dismounted and after he had rested, scouted along the edge of the mesa. Behind him were the cliff and the valley; ahead, the black, ominous edge of the forest.

He had walked about a hundred yards when he came on the tracks again. Fresh tracks, fresh spoor—this was Red Wilson's bunch all right. Andy took a deep breath, held it, and listened—but he heard no sound. "Not close enough yet," he thought. He had the trail again, and it led straight into the forest.

He went back to Sunny, picked up the reins, and taking his bearings carefully in case he wanted to backtrack to the cliff, he plunged into the timber. It felt fine at first to have pine needles instead of rocks underfoot, but gradually, as he traveled deeper into the tall pine woods, the light faded, and the trees, looking like pillars holding up the ever-narrowing walls of a tunnel, closed in around him. The going was harder. Stumps, brush, fallen logs barred his way, and once again he started climbing and scrambling along the trail.

Then, suddenly, as though somebody had pulled a switch, the last trace of moonlight disappeared.

For a few moments, Andy plunged on, trying to keep his bearings by an occasional star that poked its light through the pine branches. Sunny followed him closely, his nose almost touching Andy's shirt, as though he were frightened of being left alone and afraid that he might lose his master.

Andy soon realized that he could never track anything through such complete darkness. Turning, he plunged

back toward the edge of the mesa, but it, too, seemed to have disappeared. Instead of thinning trees and moonlight ahead, the woods grew deeper, and the deadfall thicker.

He stopped again to listen and felt the strange loneliness of the high country. Not even a coyote or an owl—or even the rustle of the field mouse—broke the stillness.

Gradually, chill crept up his spine and spread across his neck, prickling the hairs on the back of his head. He was lost—lost in a forest high among the lonesome peaks, and no one in all the world knew where he was. His knees started shaking. He had no jacket, and the cold bit through his shirt. His teeth began to chatter and he sank to the ground, huddling against a tree. He had spent nights in the woods before, but he had never been lost, and as his confidence ebbed away, terror took its place. He felt like a tiny animal caught in a great smothering trap of trees. He wanted to yell, scream, anything to break the silence.

He jumped to his feet and ran, yanking Sunny along behind him. He clawed his way through underbrush, scrambled over deadfall, bruising his knees. The sweat of fear poured down his face, and he lunged desperately this way and that looking for an opening in the forest looming over him.

Then, without warning, Sunny stopped dead, and Andy fell over backward.

Danger on the Wind

AFTER A TIME—it might have been a minute or an hour—he sat up and looked around. He was still in the deep woods; his heart still beat against his chest with trip-hammer blows, but the horror was slowly ebbing out of him, and when he felt a warm breath on the back of his neck and the slight tickle of Sunny's whiskers nudging him, the fear gradually came under control.

Climbing to his feet, he leaned against Sunny's neck. "So this is what it feels like to be lost!" he thought. He had read about the panic that sometimes overcame mountain men when nature tricked them. Sooner or later it happened to all woodsmen.

Scrubbing Sunny between the ears, he listened to an icy wind creep through the pine branches, making lonesome whispering sounds, and shivering, he tried to pull himself together.

"Don't worry," he thought. "Think it out. What is the smart thing to do? How would Uncle Wes act?" Certainly, it was stupid to bang around in the brush looking for open country. Even if he reached the edge of the mesa

again he was thoroughly rimrocked until dawn. He would do better to stay where he was. "Build a fire," he thought. "Keep warm and wait."

He led Sunny to a spot where the ground was flat, unsaddled him, and tied him to a tree. Finding an open space with no underbrush to catch fire, he slipped to his knees and began collecting twigs. Long ago he had learned always to carry matches with him, and soon he had a tiny blaze throwing giant shadows against the pines. As the light grew he found plenty of dry wood, and scraping away the pine needles he built up the blaze until the flames pushed the darkness away, making a cone of light that seemed friendly and warm.

Already Andy's fear seemed foolish to him, but although he was a little bit ashamed of his panic, he knew there was nothing peculiar about it. It was something every mountain man had to experience at least once. He slipped into his big yellow slicker, and hunching himself close to the fire, he folded his arms like an Indian, and waited for the morning.

As the hours dragged by and the wind kept up an icy murmur in the pines, Andy fell asleep. Sunny pawed the ground restlessly, for he was hungry and there was no grass, not even an aspen leaf within his reach. Gradually the fire died down into glowing coals, and these, too, finally paled as the first gray of dawn filtered through the branches.

At last the sun spotlighted a peak just beyond the camp, and Andy stirred. At his first movement, Sunny

whinnied loudly, angrily, saying, "Hey, boss! We haven't eaten for twelve hours. Rise and shine, boy, and let's look for chuck."

Andy opened his eyes and after rubbing them with his knuckles, he struggled to his feet. Throwing off the slicker, he stretched his arms and drew in deep breaths of pine-scented air. He was cold; he felt rather beaten up as though he had been in a fight, but he was all in one piece. And Sunny was right, he thought; it sure was time for grub.

Although he hunted through his pockets hoping for some candy or some grains of oats for Sunny, he found nothing but a jackknife, a dirty handkerchief, and one half of a stick of gum. Ripping off the paper, he stuffed the gum into his mouth. The flavor tasted good, but it made him hungrier than ever.

Finally, after stamping out the last traces of his fire, he slid the saddle on Sunny's back and started through the woods to look for an open park or some point from which he could see landmarks.

Before he had covered fifty yards, he saw the mountain peak shining in front of him. He stopped in his tracks, not knowing whether to laugh or be angry with himself. He was at the upper end of the mesa, and without knowing it he had been within a hundred yards of open ground all night.

Leading Sunny out of the woods, he found himself at the foot of a grassy hill that sloped up to the rocky peak above, and leaving his horse to graze, he climbed up above

the timber line, above the grass, to the base of the red volcanic rocks.

In front of him stretched the mesa covered with a great pool of dark green timber. It looked about ten miles long, and was broken here and there by tiny meadows. In one of them Andy saw a herd of elk grazing, looking, he thought, like tiny lead toys small enough to pick up between thumb and forefinger.

Andy breathed deeply of the cold air. Last night he had felt like a hunted animal, a weasel or a rabbit cornered in the darkness, but now he was more like one of the Greek gods he had read about, who looked down from Mount Olympus on the tiny humans below.

He turned toward the left, toward the North Fork, hoping to see some sign of the trail crossing the mesa. Then suddenly, catching his breath sharply, he ducked behind the nearest boulder.

Less than a quarter of a mile away, on the edge of a small clearing, he saw a horse grazing and beyond it in the timber more horses in a rope corral. Although the sun hadn't reached them yet, and he could not identify them, he knew that somewhere under those trees Red Wilson and Chet Myers were sleeping.

Andy took the bearings of the enemy carefully, then slid like a lizard down the rocks toward Sunny. He knew that, if Red or his friend Chet looked toward the peak, they would surely see him and he would lose his one advantage—surprise.

Andy forgot his hunger, his cold body, and his fears of

the night before. This was adventure, detective work, and it required careful thinking, and even more careful tracking.

Reaching Sunny, he led him back to the edge of the woods. He wished he could take the pony with him, but Sunny would surely nicker at the sight of the other horses and announce to Red that he was being trailed. He let the bit out of the pony's mouth so that he could eat. "You stay here, Sunny," he said. "I'll be back."

Taking the rope from his saddle, he started along the edge of the woods. Sunny raised his head for a moment watching his master, then dropped it again, and went on pulling the lush mountain grass.

Moving like a shadow against the trees, Andy followed the line of the forest that led toward the North Fork. His first move, he thought, was to prove definitely that Red had stolen Brownie, that a real crime had been committed, for after all, Shorty might have been wrong.

After ten minutes' walking, Andy figured that he must be opposite Red's camp and he slipped into the woods. He could see the sunlight following him, dropping like a bright curtain behind him, and he wondered whether he could find Brownie in time, before the two men awoke, broke camp, and headed for the North Fork.

As he drew nearer he could hear horses whinnying and pawing the ground. Red must have kept them in the corral all night without any feed, he thought, starving them to save himself the work of wrangling at dawn.

Reaching the edge of the meadow, he dropped to his

hands and knees and crawled like an Indian, testing each bit of ground to make sure no twig would snap, no broken branch would give him away.

Finally, sliding behind a big log, he peeked over its edge. Across the grass he saw a pencil of smoke drifting up through the trees. Wilson was out in the field bringing up the saddle horse he had staked out for the night, and Andy recognized a big black that Red had wrangled with for the last month. But he couldn't make out the other horses in the corral back in the timber; they were crowded so close together that they could barely move.

Andy turned to his right and slid along the edge of the timber, crawling, or running in a crouch when the pines were thick enough. Although he carried his rope in his right hand, he wished he had left it behind. He had had some wild idea of snaking Brownie out from the bunch, but now the rope was in his way, catching on bushes and slowing him down.

As he drew nearer the camp he moved more slowly, slithering along like a snake, not even raising his head. He knew his direction, and with his ear close to the ground he could hear the horse hoofs pawing restlessly. All he wanted was one look at Brownie, one sure proof that he had been rustled. He wished he dared move faster, for any minute now the men would break camp.

Finally, coming to a thick clump of brush, he raised his head slowly and peered between the leaves.

He was so close to the campfire that his heart jumped into his throat. He recognized the man called Chet Myers

—short, heavy-set with a dark growth of beard, and a moustache—squatting over the fire holding a skillet full of sputtering bacon.

Even closer, Andy saw the broad back and red hair of Wilson, who was pouring out black coffee into a tin cup.

As the scent of the bacon drifted toward him, Andy licked his lips and his mouth started to water. Raising his head further to see into the rope corral, he recognized a blue roan, one of yesterday's buckers, a mare that was used for bareback-bronc riding, and a rump that might belong to Brownie. But there were too many horses jammed together, and he couldn't be sure.

Still hugging the ground, Andy wished the delicious smell of coffee wouldn't tickle his nostrils, but he knew he had to lie there, his stomach tight with hunger, until they were finished. Only when they had taken down the rope corral and turned the horses loose, would he be sure about Brownie.

Red grunted, "Doggone, I'm stiff from that fall!"

Chet laughed shortly. "I bet," he said. "Wonder where that brown horse come from."

"Just a cayuse," Red said. "Marvin has quite a bit of range stock."

Andy pricked up his ears. Maybe Red, himself, was going to give him the answer. Perhaps he wouldn't need to see Brownie.

"I wonder—did Shorty see him?" Chet asked.

"Nope," Red answered, "he drove in just after the saddle buckin'."

Andy's elbow, the one he was leaning on, went numb, but he dared not move. He was afraid to miss a single word of the conversation. He was surprised because they seemed to be in no hurry. They finished their breakfast leisurely and scraped out the pans with a piece of sacking.

"Say, Red," Chet said, standing up and stretching his thick arms. "Turn them ponies in the meadow. They'll wrangle easier after they've fed a while."

Now! Andy felt his heart pounding. Only a minute or so and he would know for sure. Then he could either face the two men and demand his horse, or fade back into the woods, beat a retreat to Sunny, and trail them.

He ducked down again, lying flat, waiting, trying to make no sound.

The sun had caught up with him and brought with it a puff of wind from the east. It waved the pine branches above him, and sent the campfire smoke swirling. Then it passed on over the meadow and up toward the peaks, carrying the scent of the corralled horses to a sorrel high on the sidehill. Sunny's whinny came faintly across the intervening forest.

"Who's that?" Chet turned quickly toward the sound and looked across the park.

"Dogged if I know." Red cocked his ear, listening. Again Sunny's nicker drifted across the woods, and Andy, digging with his nails into the turf, felt the sweat drop into his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he waited.

"You figger somebody's follerin' us?" Chet asked.

Red shrugged his massive shoulders. "Wes Marvin,

maybe," he said. "That dude kid'd never have the guts to come up here."

Another breath of wind passed over the camp and twisted the smoke toward the bushes. Andy felt his eyes smart, and the smoke, entering his throat, made him want to choke. Desperately, he tried to hold back a cough, but the smoke grew thicker, whirling and spinning through the bushes. He coughed once with his mouth closed, but that made his next breath deeper and he sputtered aloud. The cough grew worse. He choked, gasping for breath, and looking up through watery eyes he saw the strong legs and giant chest of Red Wilson looming over him.

"Well, look who's here," the wrangler sneered. "We caught us a dude, Chet. A real live dude!" Reaching down, he grabbed Andy by the collar. "Get up, sonny boy," he growled.

8

Hog-tied

C LIMBING OUT OF the brambles, his eyes still streaming, Andy was just beginning to regain his breath when Red gave him a push that sent him spinning into the middle of the camp. "Look what I caught in the brush, Chet," he said.

For just a second a worried expression crossed Chet's face. "What in blazes you doin' here?" he asked.

Andy wiped his eyes, cleared his throat, and said, "I came for my horse, that's all."

"Is that so!" Red towered over him. "Now ain't that a funny way to come for a horse. To sneak up through the brush carrying *this*." Red laughed the hearty, false laugh that always made Andy angry, and picking up Andy's rope, he waved it in his face. "Most people lookin' for horses ride right up and dab a rope on 'em," he snarled. "But when they're goin' to *steal* a horse—then's when they creep up like a weasel, a dirty little crawlin' weasel!"

"Never mind the names," Andy shouted. "We'll see who's the horse thief around here." All the meanness he had suffered from Red, all the taunts and cries of "Hey,

dude" churned in Andy's mind. He let his anger go, for this was the showdown, he thought. He'd get his horse back if he had to tie into both of them with his fists. "Where's my horse?"

"Gettin' tough, eh?" Red's face had almost paled with fury, and Andy could see a vein throbbing in his forehead. "Little dude boy wants to fight, huh?"

"You stole my brown gelding last night. I want it back. And make it quick, too," Andy roared.

"Brown gelding." Red pretended to be terribly surprised. "What brown gelding?"

"The one that piled you up in three jumps in front of all the dude girls," Andy said.

"Why you—" Red reached out a big hand and shoved Andy so hard that he fell against a tree, slamming his head against the trunk. "I'll teach you . . ." Red drew back his foot to kick Andy while he was down.

"Wait a minute, Red." Chet walked between Andy and the big horse wrangler. "Take it easy."

"Why?" Red tried to push Chet aside. "I'm going to teach this brat a lesson. I'll—"

"No, you won't," Chet said calmly. "Not yet, anyway. First we'll just see what's on his mind." He turned on Andy, who was just pulling himself to his feet. "You think we got a horse of yours, huh?" he asked.

"I know darn well you have." Andy came up still ready for a fight.

"Well, suppose you go get him and prove it," Chet went on.

"Sure!" Andy's eyes were bright with anger.

If they thought he couldn't prove ownership of Brownie, they were crazy. The horse carried Uncle Wes's brand. He walked confidently to the rope corral and yelled, "Hey, Brownie, come for oats!"

He didn't look behind him, but he knew that the two men were there, watching closely. "Come on, Brownie, boy!" he shouted confidently.

But although the horses stirred restlessly in the corral, no brown head came up. A tiny doubt entered Andy's mind, but the corral was crowded, and perhaps Brownie couldn't be seen. He slipped under the rope, talking softly to the horses so as not to surprise them. He knew that horses changed a lot, once they were in the hills and running with a strange bunch. Brownie might have forgotten him. "Hey you, Brownie," he called.

Suddenly, a head went up—a brown head. "Brownie! Hey, Brownie! Oats," Andy yelled excitedly. This would show 'em. This was his answer.

Then the brown horse turned toward him. Andy saw a long white blaze down the nose and small eyes, with glaring whites in them. His heart sank. It wasn't Brownie. He'd been wrong. He'd made a fool of himself and he couldn't deny it, because there was no doubt—Brownie wasn't here.

The two men behind him had been whispering together and now Chet said, "You satisfied?"

Andy slipped out of the corral. "Yes," he said. "My horse isn't here."

"You ain't kiddin'." Red had a sneer on his face. "But you're here. An' we think you was goin' to steal one of our horses."

"Don't be silly," Andy said. "Brownie's disappeared, and I thought you had him. So did Shorty Franklin."

Chet looked up quickly. "Shorty Franklin! What's he know about it? He's never even seen the horse, an' you know it."

"That's right," Andy said, reluctantly. "But I described Brownie to him."

"You're a liar," Red burst out. "You sneaked up here with a rope. You was goin' to try to rustle one of our horses—an' we're goin' to teach you a lesson. Put out your hands."

"Why?" Andy saw his rope, still in Red's fist.

"Put 'em out, I said."

"Nuts." Andy ducked, but not fast enough, because Chet tripped him, sending him to the ground again. Then Red stepped forward, tying him up swiftly and skillfully, until he lay like a trussed calf at their feet.

"You know somethin'?" Chet squatted down beside him. Andy was forced to look into his milky blue eyes. "You're in trouble, you've been caught tryin' to steal horses."

"You're crazy. Nobody'd believe that." Andy, looking into Chet's cold, expressionless face, realized that Chet, not Red, was the dangerous man. Red blustered; Red got angry, but this man was the boss, and he was the dangerous one.

"A couple of years ago," Chet went on, "Wes Marvin, our wonderful game warden, caught me shootin' a little meat on the game preserve. He got me put in the clink."

"Yeah, and you'll go again, if you don't let me up," Andy raved. "Uncle Wes won't stand for this."

Chet shook his head. "I ain't in any trouble," he said. "You're the hombre that's going to jail."

"Even if I did try to steal your horse—which I didn't—they wouldn't keep me in jail long," Andy said. "I'm a minor. I'm not old enough."

"Maybe." Chet smiled. "But you'll go to the jail just the same for a while. It'll look good in the papers, too. Wes Marvin, the great Wes, always on the side of the law—with his nephew in jail."

Andy heard Red laugh, and even Chet smiled without humor. "We're goin' to teach Mr. Wes Marvin a lesson, ain't we, Red?"

"We sure are," Red said, roaring.

Andy felt the sweat come out on his forehead. He began to realize what a fool he had been, what a stupid—yes, he couldn't deny it—*dude* trick he had done. They could put him in jail for a while, until Uncle Wes got him out. They could hurt Uncle Wes's reputation, too, maybe even spoil his chances for being game warden again. And Sally . . . What would Sally think of him? Andy choked.

Then he remembered the sheriff—Sheriff Blackwell, a friend of his. He was an old-timer, a mountain man. He would never jail a boy. "Huh," he growled up at Chet,

who still sat watching, "Sheriff Blackwell won't pull me in. You don't know what you're talking about."

Chet shook his head. "Maybe you didn't know," he said. "Old Blackwell's quit. Resigned. Caldwell's took his place. An' he's a friend of *mine*!"

Andy remembered now something Uncle Wes had said about a new sheriff. How he was a weakling, and maybe a crook. His heart dropped into his boots, and he lay still, waiting for Chet's next move.

The barrel-chested man stood up saying, "Yep, you'll go to jail all right. And the sooner the better." He turned to Red. "Saddle up an' get this kid's horse from the slope. We got to get to the Torrance Ranch on North Fork by noon. We'll phone the sheriff about this half-pint rustler from there."

An hour later they entered the trail that led down the side of the mesa toward the North Fork. Chet rode ahead, leading the pack horse, then came the loose string of ponies, followed by Red, leading Sunny. Andy was forced to ride with his wrists tied behind his back, and descending the mountainside this way threw him off balance. Plodding downhill, Sunny shook him with every step, and by the time they reached the gentler slopes, Andy was so tired that he slumped forward heavily in the saddle.

Gradually, the forest gave way to open range, rolling buttes covered with sage, and occasional creek beds lined with cottonwoods and aspens. Sunny's pace eased as the ground leveled off, and Andy's mind began to work again.

More than anything else he wanted to avoid the disgrace of going to jail. "If I could only escape long enough to find a telephone," he thought. "If I could get in touch with Uncle Wes, he'd soon fix up everything."

And where was Brownie? He couldn't disappear into thin air!

While these thoughts passed through his tired mind, Andy kept rubbing the rope that tied his wrists, scraping it against the cantle of the saddle. His hands were numb and he could feel the wrists becoming raw, but he kept rubbing patiently, trying to get each strand to soften up.

Glancing at the man in front of him, he saw that Red's hand held Sunny's reins loosely. The little sorrel led well, and there was no need to pull on him. Ahead, the horses lazed along, so hungry that they often paused to grab at the bunch grass, and Red yelled and cursed, trying to hurry them.

At last, just as he was about to give up hope, Andy felt the rope loosen, and gradually he pulled it free. But he was careful not to cast it off entirely and to keep his hands behind his back in case Red should look around.

Now what? He looked at the loose hand holding Sunny's reins, at the bunch of horses kicking up a cloud of dust ahead, and beyond that to the solid figure of Chet Myers leading the parade. Andy wondered whether, if he timed it just right, he could make a break. It might be possible in open country, he thought, but right now there was a fence on his right and a gully on his left. He had to wait for the right place—the right second.

What worried him most was the danger for Sunny. Andy knew he would have to handle the horse without reins until he could pick them up, and meantime Sunny might step on them, yank his mouth, and go down head first, breaking a leg, even killing himself.

He might! But he was smart, and Andy knew that when Sunny wanted to, he could travel with his reins down, holding his head sideways.

The country was opening up as they neared the valley, and as Andy watched, the gully veered away to the left of the trail. A few minutes later, the fence on his right ran off at an angle.

Ahead was open range, and beyond that Andy could see irrigated fields, a river, and the road which led up North Fork. Straightening in his saddle, he carefully shucked off the rope, tossing it well behind him so as not to startle Sunny. The sorrel felt the difference in his master's body immediately. His ears flicked back, but Andy didn't dare whisper to him.

Red was cursing the horses, and the hand holding Sunny's reins hung limp at his side. Andy ran his hand up Sunny's neck, trying to warn him, to prepare him for a sudden jump without the reins. He gave one last look at the landscape. To his right was open country, rolling range with no sign of a fence. It was now or never. It was Sunny's fast getaway—the surprise—that counted. He had to gain ground immediately and hold the lead.

Andy waited until he saw a smooth-looking stretch of range, free of rocks and with no sign of gopher holes. Sud-

denly he leaned forward and kicked with his heels. Sunny shot ahead, yanking the reins from the unsuspecting Red. Andy pressed with his left knee, at the same time cuffing Sunny lightly on the left side of the jaw. Sunny raced off to the right of the string of horses, his reins flying in the wind.

9

Race for the Wire Gate

Andy heard Red Wilson's shout of surprise, and off to the left Chet's answering yell. Reaching forward almost to Sunny's bit, he grabbed the flying reins and drew them back along the horse's neck. Then glancing back, he saw that he had less than a hundred yards' start on Red and only a little more on Chet. But he was gaining—even against Red's big black. Andy leaned up close to Sunny's mane like a jockey. "Go it, Sunny!" he yelled happily. "Pour it on, boy!"

Before them the range rolled away gently. Sunny's hoofs beat a hard rhythm, striking sparks from the stones, and sending up spurts of dust.

It all depended on the distance, Andy thought. Sunny was a mountain pony, a calf-roping horse, and mighty fast for a quarter of a mile, but after that a larger horse like Red's could catch him.

Trying to ignore the yells behind him, Andy kept watching the country. In the distance he could see the road and the telephone line. They meant freedom—if only he could avoid fences.

He saw one when he topped the next rise. It was coming in from his right, a long line of barbed wire against the sky line. Andy eased Sunny toward the left and glanced over his shoulder. Red was still directly behind him, neither losing nor gaining ground now, and Chet was riding wide to his left. They were yelling at each other, but over the thunder of Sunny's hoofs Andy couldn't hear what they were saying. It looked as though Chet were taking down his rope. "Well, let him," Andy thought. "He'll sure have to do better than he's doing now to get a loop over me."

Sunny held his pace, with his little neck stretched out and his ears back listening to his pursuers. Already foam flecked his bit, and the sweat on his neck lathered the reins, but his muscles were tireless, his lungs pumped evenly, and he tore across the range like a scared rabbit.

Andy looked behind him and saw that Red was gaining; the big black had speed once he got going. But Chet seemed farther to the left than ever. "I'm going to make it," Andy thought. "The road's less than a quarter of a mile away."

But when he topped the next ridge his heart sank. Coming in from the left was the thing he dreaded most—another fence. And the fence on his right was veering closer, too, narrowing the pursuit, driving him into a lane. He realized he would have to find an opening and get through it first or be cornered.

Desperately he watched for a gate, hoping for a wooden one, although he didn't expect to find it—not out here on

the range. What he looked for was a Missouri wire gate hooked between two fence posts.

Slowly the barbed wire converged on the little sorrel, limiting the ground, cutting Andy's chances, and behind him the big black horse and the redheaded rider drew nearer.

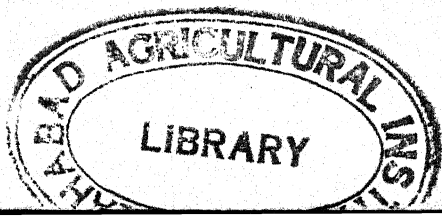
Andy decided that Chet was hugging the left-hand fence to cut him off from a gate. Standing in his stirrups, he craned his neck trying to find it first, his eyes roving up and down the miles of posts that were gradually hemming him in.

Suddenly he saw it—two heavier, braced posts with slightly sagging wire between them. For once he wished Sunny was a jumper, but no good cow pony would leap barbed wire.

Andy pointed Sunny at the gate and kicked hard. "Go it, boy!" he yelled. "One more spurt!" Beyond the fence he could see a ranch in a grove of cottonwoods, and just beyond that the main road with cars speeding up and down it. If he could only get there first. . . .

Sunny rocketed ahead. The dust flew from his little hoofs. His mane flattened; his tail blew straight out behind; and in one final burst of speed they reached the gate with thirty seconds to spare.

Andy pulled Sunny down on his haunches, and the little horse stopped as though he had a calf on the end of a rope. Vaulting out of the saddle, Andy rushed the gate. Behind him he could hear the rolling thunder of hoofs—but there was a chance, a slim chance.



The gatepost was held to the fence by two wire loops, and it seemed to Andy that it was strung as tight as a violin. He yanked at the post desperately, trying to free it from the loops; then reaching around the fence he pulled the gatepost toward him with both hands, tearing his shirt and scratching his wrists on the wire. The hoofbeats pounded nearer—louder every second. Suddenly the wire loops loosened, the post came free, and Andy threw it away from him, leaving an opening big enough for Sunny. But as he rushed back to his horse, he saw the two riders loom up over him. He heard a whistling sound, and looking up, he saw Red's loop flash by his head—a clear miss.

Andy had vaulted halfway into the saddle when Chet made his throw. It was a big loop and it slid off Sunny's ears and down across Andy's shoulders. He struggled to free himself, yanking at the rope, fighting to shake it off. But Chet pulled down on him, took a dally on his horn, and backing his horse away, threw Andy to the ground.

Andy stopped struggling. There was no use fighting now. While Chet dismounted and walked down his rope, coiling it as he did so, Andy just looked up at Sunny, who stood with his head down gasping for breath. When Chet reached him and yanked him to his feet, Andy still stared at his sorrel who had tried so hard—and lost. "Never mind, Sunny," he said aloud. "You did your best, boy."

An hour later when they reached the Torrance Ranch, Andy was still tied so tightly that he didn't have a ghost

of a chance to make another break. Although the Torrance outfit seemed to be a big layout, when they passed through the main gate Andy saw no sign of life.

"Them horse buyers ain't here yet," Red said to Chet.

But as they rode into the yard, a man came out of the big ranch house. He was gray haired, heavy set, and wore an expensive white Stetson. He looked at Andy curiously. "What you got this kid tied up for?" he asked.

"He was tryin' to rustle one of our horses," Chet answered. "We're goin' to turn him over to the sheriff."

"I wasn't stealing horses," Andy said. "Chet's lying."

"You do look kind of young for a horse thief." The gray-haired man smiled at him, and his eyes were kind. "What's the matter, Chet? How could a kid this age rustle stock from you two grown men?"

"He snuck up at dawn, Sam," Chet said. "But you don't have nothin' to do with it. We'll turn him over to the sheriff and let him decide."

"I guess that's fair enough," Sam said thoughtfully. "But you don't need to keep him roped, do you? He looks kind of beat up."

"He's more dangerous than he looks, Sam," Red said.

Chet swung off his horse. "I'll take the rope off him, if you'll figger some place to put him where he can't get out."

"Put him in my cabin," Sam said.

"Nope, he's slippery. Gotta be a place that's tight."

"Now look," Andy said. "You better not lock me up. You can't prove I was going to steal your horse—"

"Be quiet!" Chet turned to Sam. "Now, Sam," he said, "all I ask is a tight place. It won't be more'n a couple of hours. But he's a dangerous kid. He belongs in reform school, don't he, Red?"

"He sure does," Red nodded.

"Well." Sam looked away from Andy as though he were ashamed. "O.K. I'll tell you what. Put him in the grain bin over there behind the gate. It's tight. No windows. He can't get out, and it'll be quite comfortable."

"Gee, look, mister—"

"I'm sorry, boy." Sam looked up at him again. "But I can't take a chance. You just lie there on the oat bags and take it easy. When the sheriff gets here, we'll see what's what."

They led Andy through a gate and made him dismount. The grain bin was a tiny, windowless cabin made of boards so closely matched that no pack rat, not even a mouse, could get at the grain inside. The door was heavy, and was held closed by a steel hasp, into which was driven a heavy wooden plug. Chet pushed him in, closed the door, and hammered the plug into place.

Inside it was almost pitch dark, and the air was full of the smell of grain. Andy slumped down on an oat bag and listened.

"Think he could shake that plug loose?" he heard Red ask.

Someone hit the chunk of wood several extra wallops. "Not a chance," he heard Chet say. "That'll hold him."

"What'll we do with his horse?"

"Leave him here an' close the gate, answered Chet."

They weren't even going to unsaddle Sunny, Andy thought angrily. Just let him stand there in the little yard, and maybe roll on his saddle. Once again, Andy's temper flared. They had no right to hide him in this dark, smelly hole while they called the sheriff and tried to disgrace him. He rushed at the door and pounded on it. He climbed back as far as he could over the grain bags and charged, throwing his whole weight against it. The boards gave a little, but not the tiniest crack of light appeared.

Andy kept at it, bruising his shoulder, trying to break the plug of wood in the steel hasp. But there was no room to get up any real speed, and he wasn't heavy enough. Finally, panting and rubbing a sore shoulder, he staggered back to the oat bags and dropped down, exhausted.

Now that his anger had gone, he began to wonder what would happen to him. He saw himself in the city jail, looking out between the bars when his Uncle Wes—or maybe even Sally—came to see him. They would soon prove he was no horse thief. They'd get him out all right. But darn it, it was a disgrace just the same. And Uncle Wes's enemies—men like Chet Myers—would laugh at him, a game warden, an officer of the law, unable to keep his own nephew out of trouble.

Lying there rubbing his shoulder, Andy felt a rip in his shirt, and he remembered Shorty Franklin's warning. Maybe there was something in what the little cowboy said—maybe a shirt *could* bring bad luck.

Andy shook his head ruefully. If he threw away his

unlucky shirt, it wouldn't make any difference. He'd still be locked in an oat bin, waiting to go to jail. What he needed was not less shirt but more brains. He was paying for being stupid, that was all.

It wasn't that Red Wilson was so smart, he thought. Chet Myers did the thinking and made all the decisions. Andy tried to remember what he had heard about the man. He had a rundown homestead on the South Fork. He bought and sold horses; he had a bad reputation among the local ranchers; and Uncle Wes had put him in the clink for poaching on the game preserve. That was all Andy knew, but it was enough. He was willing to bet right now that if anyone had stolen Brownie, it wasn't Red—but Chet.

But had the little bronc been rustled after all? Maybe Brownie had simply been turned loose and had drifted home by now and was standing in Uncle Wes's corral, munching hay. "Making me look sillier than ever," he mumbled. Andy had no idea how long he sat there, thinking these dismal thoughts, though he suspected that what seemed like hours really were only minutes. Yet these were ticking away, cutting down the time before the sheriff would arrive, destroying his chances of avoiding jail.

He scrambled over the oat bags to the door and listened, but the only sounds were distant shouts. Probably the buyers for a rodeo stock ranch were there, trying out the buckers Red had brought with him.

Finally, as he crouched with his ear to a crack, he heard

a grunting sound. "Sunny!" Andy thought. "He's rolling on his saddle."

"Hey, Sunny," he called, "stop that!"

Immediately Sunny whinnied, loud and long, saying, "Hey, boss, where are you? How's to get rid of this saddle, and how about some grub, huh?"

Andy pounded on the door, and he heard Sunny coming. He didn't nicker loudly, now that he knew where the boss was, but he made soft riffling noises through his nose. "Sounds of affection," Andy thought, and a lump came into his throat. Sunny didn't care whether his master made a fool of himself or not. He could be a horse thief and anything else and the little sorrel would still be his pal. Doggone it, Sunny would get him out of here if he only knew how.

He could hear the horse nosing the door now, making little snuffling noises. If Sunny could only pull that plug with his teeth, like a circus horse!

But wait a minute! Andy scratched his tousled head. Maybe . . . maybe Sunny *could* help! It wouldn't hurt to let him try!

10

Fugitive from the Law

SLIDING BACK TO the oat bags, Andy opened his jack-knife and slit one at the top, letting the grain pour out over his hands onto the floor. "Some of this is going to be wasted," he thought. "But I can't help it. I'll pay Mr. Torrance later."

Grasping a fistful of kernels, he went to the door. "Sunny!" Andy called. Immediately he heard an answering rattle; Sunny was right there and as hungry as a wildcat in a blizzard. "Oats, Sunny," Andy whispered. "No kidding! Listen!" He crunched the grain up in his fingers and let some of it rattle to the floor.

Sunny whinnied again, loudly this time. He could hear the oats all right, just the other side of that door.

"Come and get 'em," Andy said, letting more grains spatter on the boards at his feet. "If you want 'em, you've got to find 'em."

Sunny did what any hungry horse would do—he pawed the ground. Andy kept rattling the oats, driving Sunny frantic. He nickered so much that Andy was afraid some-

one would hear and come to investigate. Finally one foot struck the sill, and the door rattled on its hinges.

"Higher," Andy whispered. "Higher, Sunny." Sunny hit the door a good wallop with his steel shoe, loosening the whole frame slightly. Andy rushed it, threw his weight against it, but still nothing happened. It was a well-built shed, meant to keep out weather as well as rats. But Sunny had opened a tiny crack along the bottom of the doorsill, enough for Andy to let a few grains of oats slip through. He heard Sunny snuffing the ground outside. His lips made tiny pops as he picked up the kernels. "Good!" Andy thought. "That will make him hungrier than ever."

As soon as the last grain had disappeared, the sorrel began to nicker again. "Come and get it, Sunny," Andy said. "Keep after it, boy!"

Bang! The door shivered. Andy could only hope that everyone at the corrals was too busy to notice.

Again the door shook, and this time Andy thought he heard steel strike steel. That meant Sunny had hit the hasp. He backed away. "Try again, Sunny," he said. "Once more!"

There was a thundering crash that shook the house to its foundations, and then, as though there never had been a lock of any kind, the door swung open.

Sunny's nicker blasted the little room. He loomed in the doorway, blocking out the light, and both front feet thundered onto the floor.

"Hey, Sunny, there isn't room in here for both of us." Andy pushed him back into the yard, and scooping up a

generous quantity of oats, he dropped them outside so that Sunny could enjoy his meal.

At first the sunlight was so bright that Andy was almost blinded, but as his eyes became accustomed to it, he saw that Sunny had bent the hasp and smashed the wooden plug into several pieces. Andy closed the door carefully, so that his horse wouldn't help himself to the whole winter's grain supply within. Then, with Sunny munching happily, he decided to reconnoiter.

Sliding through the gate he crept along behind several dirt-roofed barns toward a long shed. As he reached the corner, he looked to his right. A bunch of men were sitting on a corral fence about a hundred yards away, completely absorbed in watching someone buck out a bronc. He saw no sign of Red or Chet, not even the white Stetson of the man he supposed to be Mr. Torrance. They were all strangers.

Andy slipped back out of sight to consider the best means of escape. If the front gate was open, he could go back for Sunny and make a break for it. But he would have to cross the yard and make sure. He had no intention of being cornered and roped down a second time.

He studied the long cabin filled with saddles resting on wooden sawhorses. It looked a conveniently dark hiding place and from it, Andy thought, he could see the gate and plan his getaway.

After looking both ways, he made a dash for the saddle house and slipped inside. "Not much time," he thought. "The sheriff will be here any minute. And when Sunny

finishes those oats, he's liable to start banging that grain bin to pieces."

He peeked around the corner of the building and saw that the big wooden gate leading out of the main yard was closed. Should he take a chance and open it first, before getting Sunny?

A burst of shouts from the corrals as a buckner tossed his rider made Andy turn his head just in time. Two men were coming around the end of the building. Ducking back into the darkness, he hid among the rows of saddles.

The footsteps drew nearer, and the two men passed in front of the door. Red and Chet! Andy crouched low, and felt the hair on his neck prickle. Bad luck was still dogging him. That darn shirt again!

The two men stopped just the other side of the doorway and squatted down, cowboy fashion, against the wall. "Might as well stay here," Red said. "We can catch the sheriff quicker."

Andy's heart sank. "Cornered again," he thought. "And cut off from Sunny, too."

Hiding behind the farthest saddle in the deepest gloom he could find, Andy listened to the two men, and waited for them to find him.

"We done pretty good," he heard Red say. "Prices is high, this year."

"The horse we didn't bring is worth all them cayuses put together," Chet answered.

The horse they didn't bring! Andy's ears seemed to pop out of his head. Were they talking about Brownie?

"Yeah, he sure is," said Red. "Worth all the rest."

"But you gotta admit I was smart, what I did." Chet said.

"You bet."

Andy wished they would say something definite he could pin on them, but they didn't. They went on talking about other sales and deals with the agents from the rodeo stock ranch. Evidently there was a shortage of good buckers and these ranches, needing new stock, were willing to pay top prices.

Every now and then Andy would peek over a saddle at the glare of sunlight in the entrance and watch the smoke drifting up from a hidden cigarette. He was trapped, and soon the horse sale would be over and the place would fill with cowboys. Several times Sunny nickered for him, and he wondered why the men didn't go to investigate. Finally, he heard a car pull up by the gate.

"There's the sheriff," Chet said. "You go tell him to wait. I'll get the kid out of that grain bin."

Andy heard the two men get up and walk away. There was no chance to reconnoiter, no time to plan. As soon as the men were out of hearing, he slipped out of the saddle house and around the corner. He ran, bent over, keeping below a line of windows in the main ranch house, heading for some tall grass, the overflow from a nearby hayfield.

He plunged into it, stumbled, and fell headlong into icy water. It was only a shallow brook running through the grass, but he fell flat with a loud splash.

For a moment he lay still, listening, and the water, cold

and delicious, crept through his shirt, across his back and over his neck, washing away the sweat and dust and mustiness of the grain bin. Hearing no sound except the stream gurgling softly around him, he slid up to a deeper spot and drank his fill. "That's better," he thought, ducking his whole head under. "That puts a little more fight into a guy."

Then he crawled out of the stream and slipped into the grass on the farther bank. No sooner had he flattened himself into a hollow of the earth than the whole ranch seemed to explode with excitement. First he heard Chet yell, which meant he had found the smashed door of the grain bin. Then other voices joined him, and once in a while Andy could catch their words.

"He ain't got his horse," Chet yelled. "He can't be far."

"Cover the road, the main road," somebody shouted back. "He'll run out there and hitch a ride."

Lying in the grass, Andy wondered why he hadn't thought of that. It would have been a good idea—except it meant leaving Sunny.

"Look in the saddle house, Red," he heard Chet say. "The rest of you fellers go through the barns. I'll go out behind. He might be in that tall grass."

"Scram," Andy thought, "or they'll flush me like a grouse." Peeking over the hay, he noticed wires that ran across the top of the main building to a cabin just beyond. "That must be the ranch office, where the telephone is. If I can sneak in there, maybe I can get through to Uncle Wes . . . and he can get in touch with the judge and—"

"Beat up this side of the field, along the brook." It was Chet Myers's voice, quite near. In a minute they would surely pick up his trail.

Andy started crawling, following the telephone line. He tried to move like a snake, to keep the telltale grass from waving, and a breeze, bending the tops from time to time helped him to try to conceal his movements.

Watching his chance, he ducked from the grass to the back of the ranch office, and flattening himself against the wall, slid along it until he could see a corner of the yard. It was vacant; the coast was clear to make a dash for the office door.

Andy crouched, and was just ready to dive for the entrance, when the door opened, and the man called Sam came out. Andy clutched the wall, not daring to breathe. One single sound and the man was bound to hear him.

Sam stood in the yard a moment, a puzzled look on his face, listening to the yells. Then he shouted, "What's goin' on, Red?" and walked out of Andy's sight toward the corrals.

Andy, knowing that Chet was beating the grass behind him and that the rest of the men were ahead, made his decision. He counted ten slowly, to allow Sam to cross the yard, then he ran around the corner and into the office.

He found himself in a small square room built of logs. The walls were lined with a fine selection of rifles and shotguns, and above them elk, moose, and other game trophies looked down at him with glassy stares. In the middle of the room there was a table, and behind it a big desk on

which stood the thing Andy wanted most of all—a telephone.

He slipped around the table, dropped into the swivel chair and grabbed up the receiver. Now! If he could just get Uncle Wes—

Outside, he heard someone pass, someone with spurs that clinked as he walked. Andy sat, the receiver frozen to his ear, waiting until the footsteps died away. It was all a matter of luck now.

But why didn't the operator ask for the number? He shook the receiver; he looked around wondering whether this line used dial phones; then he saw the box with the handle. He remembered now. You had to crank first, then you got the operator.

He ground the handle as quietly as he could. There were still voices outside and if someone heard the phone bell they might investigate.

"Number, please?"

Andy found his hand shaking as he clutched the receiver to his ear. "Give me the Wes Marvin Ranch on the South Fork," he said in a quivering voice.

"The Marvin Ranch?"

"Yes, Marvin. Wes Marvin. This is an emergency. Hurry, will you?"

Someone had stopped outside the door, and evidently was leaning against it. Andy heard a match strike. Whoever it was lit a cigarette, and was taking it easy, in no hurry to leave.

"Hello!" Andy jumped, as the operator spoke. "I'm

sorry, but we have no number for Marvin on the South Fork."

Andy didn't dare answer.

"Hello! Torrance Ranch. I say we have no number for Marvin. Hello! Hello!"

The man leaning against the door moved away.

"Operator!" Andy whispered hurriedly, his heart pounding. "The Marvin Ranch is on the Forest Service line. It connects at the switchboard at the Quarter Circle H Ranch."

"Very well. I'll call them. Hold the line, please."

Andy held it. He pushed the receiver so tightly to his ear that it became hot and wet from the sweat pouring down his face. He heard clickings and buzzings, but no one answered. He knew that the switchboard at the Quarter Circle H was untended half the time. They kept on ringing it until someone came in from the chores and happened to answer.

His pulse beat so hard that he could hear it, and defiantly he turned away from the door. There was no use watching it; if someone discovered him, he was caught anyway.

But now, as he waited, he realized that there were no more sounds outside, no shouts, no footsteps, nothing. Either they had given up, which wasn't likely, or they *knew*. Right now they might be creeping up on the cabin, preparing to close the trap.

"Hello!"

A new voice, the Quarter Circle H at last! But it seemed to Andy that the old lady talking to the operator must be

completely deaf. It took her ages to get the name Marvin. Finally there were more buzzings and poppings and he thought he could hear the Marvin phone bell ringing.

It rang and rang, and Andy waited, listening with one ear, while the other tried to catch some sound from outside. But the stillness in the little cabin was so oppressive that he kept looking around wildly, feeling, somehow, that any sound was better than this silence. From the walls the glass eyes of the hunting trophies seemed to stare at him coldly, and he felt a shiver go up his spine.

"Hello?"

At last, a new voice. Courage flooded back into Andy. "Hello," he said. "Is this Marvin's?"

"Yes."

Darn! It was Aunt Ida. He couldn't tell her the sheriff was after him. She wasn't very strong and she might faint or something. "This is Andy," he said. "Is Uncle Wes there?"

"Andy! Where are you? We've been worried."

"I'm all right, Aunt Ida," Andy said hurriedly. "I'm on the North Fork. Can I please speak to Uncle Wes? It's awfully important."

"Your uncle's across the river, Andy. You sound worried. What's the matter?"

"Can I speak to Sally, then? Please, Aunt Ida?"

"Why, she's down at the barn, Andy."

Doggone! For a moment Andy was undecided. If he waited while Aunt Ida went to get Sally it might be too late, and he guessed there was nothing to do but break it

to his aunt as gently as he could. Then she could tell Uncle Wes.

"Well, you see, Aunt Ida," he said. "I'm here at—"

"Put down that phone!"

Andy's heart stopped. The door had opened so quietly that he hadn't even heard. Slowly he dropped the receiver back on its hook and swiveled his chair around. A florid man with a sheriff's star on his suspender was moving in on him. Behind, he could see the faces of Chet, Red, and Sam Torrance crowded in the doorway.

Andy sighed. The tension had been so great that even though he had lost the fight he was glad it was over. There was nothing to do now but make the best of it, and the startled look on the sheriff's face as he found how young and mild-looking his prisoner was, almost made Andy laugh.

Sitting behind the table in his swivel chair he felt like a businessman, and he waited until the men had crowded into the room. Then he smiled wearily. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said, trying to sound like his father at the office. "What can I do for you?"

The Mystery of the Phantom Bronc

JUST PUT YOUR HANDS out in front of you. You're under arrest."

The smile left Andy's face and he didn't feel like a businessman any more. He was just a boy, a darn fool kid about to be disgraced. He watched Red and Chet and Sam push forward into the room, filling it, towering over him until he felt like a pack rat cornered in a barn. Well, even a pack rat shows fight, he thought.

"Arrest me for *what?*" he said, backing his chair against the desk.

"Attempting to steal a horse from Chet Myers and Red Wilson," the sheriff said. "Come on now. No stalling."

"Stalling, my eye." Andy stood up, and backed against the wall. "You can't arrest me without evidence. As a matter of fact, I thought Myers and Wilson had stolen a horse from *me*. That's why I went after them. Why don't you throw *them* in the clink if you want to make an arrest?"

For a moment the sheriff looked uncertain. He was new at this, Andy saw, and he had been told what to say by Chet. He even glanced for a second in Chet's direction.

"That's a lie," Chet stepped in quickly. "He pulled that story up on the mesa, and we let him look over our horses. He admitted it then."

The sheriff glared at Andy. "You want me to serve out a warrant that they stole a horse from you?" he asked. "You think you can prove it?"

Andy thought fast. That would be a mistake. He wanted evidence first. "No," he said, slowly. "Not yet."

"Well, they've served one on you, and I've come to get you."

"What are you planning to do with me?"

"Put you in jail until the judge comes back Monday."

Andy winced. That was what hurt, and took the fight out of him. "But why?" he choked. "I'm innocent. I haven't stolen anybody's horse."

"Is that so?" The sheriff saw Andy begin to give in, and he made the most of it. "Did you or did you not trail Wilson and Myers up Hardpan Mesa last night?"

"I . . . I did."

The sheriff was enjoying the sound of his own voice. "Did you or did you not," he went on, trying to act like a prosecuting attorney, "sneak up on their cavvy of horses in the early dawn?"

"I did . . . but I wasn't—"

"Were you or were you not carrying a rope with the loop ready to snake out on one of their horses?"

"I had a rope . . . but that doesn't prove—"

"All right! I arrest you for attempted stealing, and you'll

have to stay in jail until the judge gets back. Put out your hands."

"Wait a second, sheriff." Andy looked up to see Sam Torrance elbow his way to the table. He took off his white Stetson, and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "I understand that this boy is Wes Marvin's nephew. It hardly seems likely that he's a horse thief."

The sheriff had pulled handcuffs from his pocket and was reaching toward Andy. "What's it to you?" he asked angrily.

"Well, at the moment he's a guest on my ranch. And he's only a kid and an Easterner at that. How do you figure he could rustle horses from a pair of hands like Red and Chet? It's silly."

"One sure thing," the sheriff said, turning redder than ever. "It ain't none of your business. It don't make no difference whether he's Eastern or Marvin's nephew or whether he's the governor's son—he's goin' to town with me now."

"Well, why don't you call Wes Marvin, first?"

"Because it won't do no good. He goes to jail." The sheriff was getting angrier by the minute, Andy thought. Torrance was showing him up, proving that he was in cahoots with Chet Myers.

"Yeah," Andy said. "Let me get in touch with my uncle, that's the least you can do."

"You can call him from town," the sheriff said.

"But don't you see?" Torrance reached over and put a

hand on Andy's shoulder. "This kid doesn't want to go to jail. And I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll pay his bail, right here and now."

The sheriff paused a moment before answering, and Andy thought he was beginning to be a little bit afraid. Torrance was a big rancher, well known, evidently.

But once again Chet stepped into the breach. "Only the judge can set bail," he said. "You know that, Torrance."

"Yeah," the sheriff nodded. "And he won't be back till Monday. Sorry, Torrance, but I've got to take him."

Torrance stepped back, shaking his head sadly. "Guess you'll have to go, kid," he said. "But I'll get in touch with your uncle immediately."

"Thanks." Andy had his eyes on the handcuffs. "Thanks a lot." He knew he was beaten now; there was nothing he could do, nobody to help him. "Will you look after my horse, please?" He added, "I'll pay for the oats he ate and the door he busted."

Torrance smiled at him. "What door did he bust?"

"He broke down the door of the grain bin to get at the oats . . . and to let me out." Andy tried to smile back.

"Say, he's sure smart." Torrance was trying to cheer him up. "If he went to town with you, he's so much brighter than the sheriff here, he'd probably spring you from the city jail."

"Yeah?" The sheriff slapped the handcuffs on Andy's wrists. "Maybe you'd like to come along, too?" he growled. "For interferin' with the law."

Pushing Andy in front of him, he jammed his way past the others and through the door into the blazing sun. For a second Andy thought of breaking away, running, anything. But the feel of steel on his wrists warned him that it was useless, and he staggered a little as the sheriff pushed him toward the car.

Now that it was over, the lack of food, the lost night on the mesa, and the long battle against Chet and Red began to tell on him. The way he felt, the car door the sheriff opened for him might as well have been the door of the jail itself. He leaned on it for a second, trying to clear his head, while the sheriff went around to the driver's seat.

Andy was so worn out that he didn't hear the gate open and a car with a horse trailer drive into the yard. He was fumbling at the door, trying to lean on it with the handcuffs while he climbed in, when he heard a voice say, "Hi, Torrance! Am I too late for the horse sale?"

Andy turned, straightened, and his eyes lit with sudden hope. "Shorty!" he gasped. "Tell 'em . . . tell 'em why I trailed Red."

"Great snakes, Andy!" Shorty's eyes nearly jumped from their sunburned sockets. "What are you doin' here? What are you wearin' them bracelets for?"

"Oh, golly." Andy held up his hands, letting the handcuffs glitter in the sun. "They're accusing me of being a thief. Explain about Brownie, will you? Tell 'em why I followed Red."

"Why sure, sheriff." Shorty's eyes were laughing now. "Andy, here, thought Red run off with his brown gelding."

"You're a liar!" Red yelled. His face was flaming.

Shorty stopped smiling. "I could be mistaken, Red," he said, and his voice was edged with steel. "But I ain't a liar. Now, sheriff, take them bracelets off of that kid."

The sheriff had returned to Andy's side. "Can't do it," he said. "He's accused of horse stealin' an' he goes to jail until the judge gets back." He poked Andy. "Get in," he commanded. "An' hurry up about it."

"Just a minute," Shorty stepped between Andy and the car, pushing him back gently. "You better hear what I have to say first, sheriff, if you want to hold your job."

"Yeah, why?" The sheriff's angry eyes narrowed—but he paused, he waited.

"Because you wouldn't want to put an innocent boy in jail. It wouldn't look so good. Andy followed Red Wilson and Chet Myers because I told him they had his horse."

"Don't you believe it!" It was Chet speaking. "That's impossible. Shorty never saw the bronc we're talking about."

"That's true," Shorty said quickly. "But Andy described him to me, and I saw a brown gelding in your bunch."

"Then you was seein' things," Chet said confidently. "Even young Marvin admits he wasn't in our cavy."

"That's right, Shorty," Andy said. "I couldn't find him."

"So what?" Shorty glanced at Chet and Red. They were moving close to him, getting ugly. "I made a mistake—maybe. But Andy ain't a horse thief. Now take off those bracelets, sheriff."

"Sorry, you'll have to tell it to the judge," the sheriff said uncertainly.

Although Red and Chet loomed over the little cowboy menacingly, Shorty didn't move. "I'll tell the judge, all right," he said, rocking easily on his heels, his wary eyes on Chet and Red. "When I give evidence the whole state'll believe me, sheriff. After all, I'm right well known as a rodeo hand, and folks know I'm a pretty straight shooter. When I talk it will be *news*. People will laugh from here to the Grand Canyon when I tell how the sheriff picked up one small dude kid for stealin' horses from two full-grown bums who think they're rodeo hands."

The sheriff wavered, his eyes fell, and he scuffed the ground with the toe of his boot. This was an angle he hadn't thought of.

"Hear you're running for reelection pretty soon, sheriff," Shorty went on, his eyes gleaming. "Boy, if you jail this kid you ain't goin' to have a chance."

Andy saw the sheriff was weakening. The man wanted reelection, and he was scared. "You willing to swear you sent this kid after Red and Chet?" he asked, suddenly.

"Swear is right," Shorty said, winking at Andy. "An' my swearin'll be on every front page in Wyoming. Probably the big press associations will pick it up. Fellers'll come to take funny pictures of you. You'll be through, boy! You'll be back where you belong—herdin' sheep."

"Well, mebbe you're right," the sheriff mumbled. "Mebbe I was hasty."

"Now look, sheriff—" Chet growled.

But the sheriff waved him aside. "That changes things, Chet," he said. "If you want to prefer charges, O.K. But Shorty's word's as good as yours. An' I ain't takin' the boy to jail."

As though afraid someone would change his mind for him, he hurriedly unlocked the handcuffs and without raising his eyes, climbed into his car and drove out of the yard.

As the car careened out of sight, Chet walked toward Shorty, rolling up his sleeves. "All right, Red, let's go to work on him," he snarled.

Half-heartedly, Red started to circle Shorty. "Look out, Shorty," Andy yelled. "Red's trying to get behind you."

"O.K., kid," the little cowboy said, backing away. "Clear out while the clearing's good."

"Not me!" Andy said wearily, looking around for some kind of weapon. He saw they were pushing Shorty into a corner of the yard where they could corner him and beat him up. They were both bigger and younger than the little rodeo rider, and they towered over him as he kept moving backward. Andy couldn't find anything to fight with, and he decided to run at Chet and tackle him. At least it would give Shorty a chance to break out of the corner. He crouched over and was just about to charge when he heard a cool voice behind him.

"That'll do, boys. Up with the hands."

Andy turned and saw, leaning against the office doorway, the burly figure of Sam Torrance. In his hand was a Colt .44.

Red and Chet paused and looked around, surprised.

"Up with them," Torrance said, waving the barrel. "I'm talkin' to you!"

Slowly their hands went up, and Shorty walked between them grinning. "Boy, you're slow, Sam," he said. "I thought you never *was* comin'."

Sam Torrance smiled, but his eyes remained on Red and Chet. "Get off my place, pronto," he said. "And stay off. Beat it!"

Andy watched the two men start for their horses at the other end of the yard. Now that it was over, it seemed to Andy that the fence poles rippled in the sun, and the ranch gate wobbled, too, then the whole bright world started to spin and, suddenly, feeling very sick, he fell to the ground.

"Poor kid!" Torrance said, putting his gun in his belt and running toward him.

But Shorty was there first. "Grab his feet, Sam," he said. "Let's get him out of the sun."

"Take him to my cabin." Torrance pointed the way with a nod of his head, and picked up Andy's legs.

"You bet," said Shorty, grabbing Andy's shoulders. "And by golly, when we get him there—we're sure goin' to get him out of that bad-luck shirt."

That night, Andy, full of steak and potatoes, lay on a comfortable bunk in a cabin he was sharing with Shorty, who seemed to have taken complete charge of his affairs. The little rodeo rider had fed Sunny and turned him into

the hay corral. He had called up Wes Marvin and explained everything, and even checked in with the Dude Ranch.

"Well, Shorty, I don't know how to thank you for all you've done," Andy said. "You sure pulled me out of a tight spot."

"Forget it," Shorty said, blowing out the lamp. "That's the rodeo business. Fellers is always getting in some kind of trouble like goin' broke or gettin' beat up by some bronc. The rest of us always looks out for the guy until he gets well enough to get in some more mischief."

"And probably after all this trouble, when I get home tomorrow, I'll find Brownie standing in the yard," Andy said, sleepily.

Shorty's cigarette suddenly glowed brightly in the dark as he took a deep draw. "Funny," he said, shaking his head. "Used to be a time when I could tell the color of a horse when I saw it. Maybe I've been bucked off on my head so often I can't tell brown from sky-blue pink. But there's somethin' queer about this whole business. Like one of them mystery stories. Only this one we have to solve ourselves. We could call it—let me see—*The Mystery of the Phantom Bronc*. How's that, Andy?"

But Andy didn't answer. He was fast asleep.

The Trail to Myers's Homestead

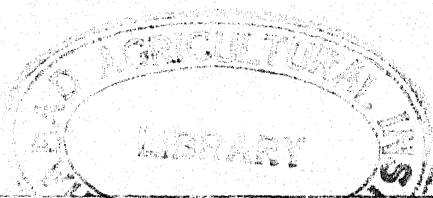
IN SPITE OF ANDY's prediction, Brownie wasn't in the yard when Andy returned, nor had anyone seen him, and every spare minute for the rest of the summer Andy spent horse hunting. Several times Andy thought he had found the horse, only to ride up and discover it was just another pony that looked like the phantom buckner.

Andy worked so hard at it, and saw so many horses that reminded him of Brownie that it got to be a standing joke on the Marvin Ranch, and whenever Sally or Uncle Wes saw him they always asked, "How many times did you see Brownie, today?"

But Andy kept looking and, except for practice with Sunny at roping and tying calves, he thought of little else.

It was his very last day in Wyoming, and Andy was sitting gloomily in Uncle Wes's living room when Sally came back from the mailbox. "Hey, look, Andy," she said. "You've got a card from Shorty."

It was dated a few days before from a small town in North Dakota.



Dear Andy, it read. Took first money here. Red Wilson took second, Chet here too. Saw one brown gelding brone pile up every rider. Weight about 900. Branded Boxed Lazy B on left shoulder. Name: Sunfish Sam. See you in the Garden. Stay in the saddle. Shorty.

"Well, you can relax, Andy," Sally said. "It's not Brownie. Not with that brand."

"No, I guess not," Andy agreed, scratching his head. "But Shorty was suspicious. It might just be . . ."

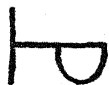
He walked over to Uncle Wes's big roll-top desk in the corner and got a pencil; then using the back of the post-card, he began to doodle.

"Now what are you doing?" Sally asked.

"Just messing around," Andy said. "I'll show you in a minute."

Sally laughed. "You think you've found your bucking horse, don't you, Andy? You better look out. You're going nuts."

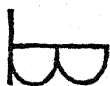
"Maybe," Andy said, "but look at this." He pushed the card in front of her. "Here's our brand, the Lazy TP."



"Sure," Sally said. "So what?"

"Well, suppose you took an iron and added a loop below the P, what would you get?"

"You'd get a Lazy B with a flat end," Sally said.



"Right!" Andy was getting excited. "So in order to blot the brand, you burn three other lines like this." He drew three more straight lines around the Lazy B. . . .



"And you've got a Boxed Lazy B on the left shoulder just where it belongs. It's about the easiest way to blot our brand you can imagine."

"Say!" Sally's eyes grew big. "I think maybe you've got something there."

"Trouble is there's no way of following it up. I don't know which rodeo Shorty's at now, and, anyway, by the time I wrote him, he'd be gone."

The door opened and Uncle Wes came in. His hat was dripping, and his hands were red with cold. He walked over to the big stone fireplace, and held his palms in front of the sputtering driftwood logs. "Winter's coming," he said. "Snow before night. You all packed, Andy? We'll want to leave for town early. Before the mud gets too deep."

"I've only got to put these clothes I have on in the suit-

case," Andy said. "I'm just going to take one more little ride and have a last look round."

Uncle Wes laughed. He knew how much Andy hated to go. "I suppose you think you'll find that brown gelding at the last minute?" he said. "But I forgot to tell you, you're driving me nuts too. I think maybe I saw him in town yesterday."

Andy jumped out of his chair. "You did? Where?"

"They were shipping some horses over at the station. I saw the rear end of one that might have been Brownie. But I didn't have time to check. I will though. Next time I'm in town, I'll find out who was shipping."

"There goes your theory, Andy," Sally laughed. "He can't very well be in North Dakota and Wyoming at the same time."

"But you only saw his rump, Uncle Wes?" Andy asked.

"Yes, that's all. I can't be sure. You've got us all seeing brown horses everywhere, Andy. I swear if a brown horse came in and sat down to dinner with us, I wouldn't be surprised. But if you're going to give Sunny one more workout, you better get started."

A few minutes later Andy and Sally rode out onto the range. Dark clouds, heavy with rain or snow, lay along the mountainsides so that only the lower hills were visible. A slow drizzle seeped through everything, beading Sunny's mane and clinging to Andy's chaps.

Sally, an old battered hat pulled over her golden hair, looked shapeless in a long yellow slicker. The oilskin hung so far down over her little bay horse, Pint, that he seemed



HEADING SUNNY INTO THE HILLS, HE FELT ONCE AGAIN
HOW MUCH HE LOVED THIS COUNTRY

Received from
READER'S SERVICE
Presb. Board of Foreign Missions
1111 North Dearborn St.
Chicago, Ill.

to have no saddle or middle at all—just a head, legs, and tail poking out of a tent.

Sally was cold and only came because it was Andy's last ride, but Andy was enjoying himself. Heading Sunny into the hills, he felt once again how much he loved this country. He watched a bunch of deer in a nearby hayfield with a big six-point buck standing guard. A jack rabbit, surprised from his hiding place under a clump of sage, hopped out of Sunny's way, and later an antelope, the fastest ground animal in America, raced past them at a high lope.

But while his sharp eyes watched the game, in his mind was always the picture of that sway-backed, snake-bellied Brownie, and Sally, watching him check each hill and valley, smiled sympathetically.

They rode up among the high buttés covered with mist, and now and then the clouds, moving slowly up the valley on an east wind, would open up suddenly, disclosing bits of mountain peak or rimrock with pine trees looking almost black against the gray afternoon.

Andy pulled up on the top of a high hill and looked at Sally. Her cheeks were pink, but he could see she was shivering. He guessed she wasn't having much fun. "O.K." He grinned at her. "We'll go back. You just don't know how hard it is to leave Wyoming, and Sunny. Even if he is going to follow me East."

"I've got to live in town all winter myself and go to high school," Sally said.

"Yeah, but look! You're coming East by plane for the finals of the rodeo. We're going to have some fun then."

"Dad hasn't promised I can go yet."

"Aw, shucks, he will." Andy stared out over the range. He felt a puff of damp breeze against his cheek. Ahead of him there was a rift in the cloud as the mist rolled away from the edge of the rimrock, and Andy saw several horses standing with their tails to the breeze. Suddenly he stood in his stirrups. His eyes narrowed, and he stared at a dark horse, spotted for a moment against a cloud as though cut out of black paper. "Look!" Andy shouted. "Over there! That's Brownie. I'm sure that's Brownie!"

Before Sally could follow with her eyes the direction of Andy's pointing finger, the cloud rolled back. "I don't see anything," she said.

"I saw Brownie," Andy stated flatly. "He's over there on that high butte. I could see that dip in his back, and that coarse head of his."

Sally laughed. "Frankly, Andy, you're goofy."

"I am not. I know my own horse when I see him. Let's get over there. I can find the place in no time. Let's hurry."

"I'll bet you a steak dinner against a bag of peanuts you won't find him," Sally said. "That's Chet Myers's homestead over there. We'll have to ride way down to the gate on the creek."

"Exactly! That's Chet's homestead." Andy was off before she could argue.

Sunny plunged down the hill, his steel shoes striking

fire from the loose rock. Through the reins he could feel the urgency in Andy's hand, and he knew they were horse hunting and had picked up the trail.

By the time they had crossed the creek and reached the gate, some of Andy's confidence had gone. His first impression, during that instant when the cloud had rolled away, had been certain, but as he thought about it he began to wonder. First, Shorty had seen Brownie in Red Wilson's bunch. Then he had written that he had seen Brownie in North Dakota; while Uncle Wes had seen him being shipped out of town in Wyoming. And now he, Andy, was seeing him right here on the home range. The darned animal appeared and disappeared like a ghost.

Andy opened the wire gate, let Sally through, and rode on. He tried not to show her his loss of assurance. It was up to him to prove his eyes were sharp, that he could pick out and identify a horse through a mile of mist.

He had little trouble finding the place under the rim-rock where he had seen the grazing horses. He had marked the spot in his mind—a hill covered with scrubby pine, runty little trees tortured by the wind, standing by themselves on the range.

Pulling up, he looked around. The drizzle was turning to snow, and he could see quite a distance in every direction. But there were no horses, let alone the one mysterious bronc he was looking for. He rode over the hill and across the little valley and examined the trees at the base of the cliff. He found plenty of signs, lots of tracks, but no ponies.

Sally followed him through it all, saying nothing.

Finally he pulled up and looked at her. He could see she was trying not to grin.

"O.K.," he said. "Go ahead and laugh. But there *were* horses here."

"Sure," Sally said, and the grin began to spread.

Andy glanced at his watch. "I've still got an hour. I'm going to do some tracking," he said stubbornly.

"I'm going to enjoy that steak dinner," Sally said. "I want French fries, hot biscuits, fresh tomato salad with cucumbers, and strawberry ice cream for dessert."

Andy was off his horse, moving downhill in the direction of Chet's homestead. "You'll have dinner with me in New York," he said absently. "Aha! Look at that!" He pointed at the ground. "See! Somebody's just been up here wrangling horses. These tracks are fresh. They've hardly filled with rain yet." He looked up at Sally gleefully. "And only one horse was shod, see. That was the wrangle horse."

Sally pulled herself from dreams of her first visit to the big city. "Sure enough," she said, "and no doubt the one with the big feet is Brownie."

"All right," Andy said, trying not to get irritated. "Make fun of me. Somebody, Chet maybe, wrangled these horses down to his homestead. And if anybody knows where Brownie is, I bet he does. Anyway, I'm going to ride down there and see."

"Then you better hurry," Sally said. "If you're not home on time, Dad won't like it. The road to town is going to be pretty slick."

As soon as Andy was sure that his trail led downhill

toward the homestead, he mounted his horse and headed him directly toward Chet's ranch. Down over the rolling buttes they trotted, and the trail became even clearer as they approached the flats.

Riding into the yard, Andy was amazed at the condition of Chet's homestead. There was a two-room log cabin with a dirt roof, unpainted window frames, and a half-toppling stone chimney at one end. Around the yard he saw an old plow, the rusting body of a Model T Ford, and hundreds of tin cans and old boxes lying among the tall weeds. The fences were down, the gate sagged open, and the only living things in sight were several gluttoned magpies squawking over some aged carcass by the back door. Over all, the snow mixed with rain fell softly, giving the place a lonesome, dismal appearance.

"Andy!" Sally said and Andy, surprised at her tone, pulled up and turned to look at her. "I don't like this place. Chet might be here. Let's get out."

"Don't worry. Nobody's around." Andy saw she was pale, unhappy, and just a little bit scared. It was a depressing ranch, and it made him feel kind of queer, too. But he still had the phantom bronc on his mind. "Where are the corrals and the barn?" he asked.

Sally pointed toward a grove of cottonwoods. "In there, Andy. But I don't think we better fool around. Even if Chet isn't here, his wife doesn't like visitors."

"Humph," Andy shrugged. "Why not?"

"Oh, she's . . . she's kind of queer, Andy. She seems

to hate people. Chet treats her pretty badly, folks say. The neighbors try to be kind to her, but she won't let 'em."

"Chet's mean to her, huh?"

"Yep." Sally kept her eye on the cabin, as though expecting someone to appear. "Dad says he's a bad man, Andy. Sometimes he leaves his wife alone in that awful cabin for months."

"Well, I can't help it." Andy looked around, picking up his tracks again. "I've just got to see if those horses are in the corral."

He rode through the gate, dismounted, and started following the hoofprints of the shod horse, but as he crossed toward the cottonwood grove the trail gradually faded and finally disappeared in the hard-packed dirt. He saw car and wagon tracks, then the signs became so mixed up he couldn't follow them. Suddenly a horse nickered from the timber.

Andy straightened. "Maybe that's Brownie!" he said.

"Andy, don't go over there." Sally's voice was dry, high pitched.

She's sure scared, Andy thought. He glanced around again, but saw no signs of Chet. If he could just get a quick peek at that corral. . . .

"You stay here, Sally," he said. "I'll be right back."

"Uh-uh!" Sally dismounted quickly. "Wait a second, Andy. I'd rather come with you."

Andy paused until she had caught up with him, then, leading Sunny, he walked into the cottonwoods, where the

mist hung in the treetops and water dripped steadily from the leaves. He found the broken-down corrals and, leaning on the fence, he watched several sad-looking ponies up to their hocks in muck, their breaths forming gray vapor around the nostrils. There was some musty hay in a dilapidated rack, but the horses seemed to find it too rotten to eat, and they whinnied at him dismally, asking to be moved out of this dreary place.

"See, Andy, he isn't here," Sally said in an almost pleading voice. "Let's get out of here. You'll be late, if we don't hurry."

"O.K. Just a minute." Andy glanced at the remains of a barn across the corral, and listened. Maybe there was a horse in there.

He heard the slow drops falling from the trees onto the surrounding brush, and the sucking sounds as the horses pulled their feet from the mud. The magpies were still quarreling behind him, and now and then he heard the rasping of Sally's slicker as she moved restlessly beside him.

"Hush," he said. "Can you hear a horse in that barn?"

"No," Sally said firmly.

Andy heard a thump.

"Yes," he said. "There's a horse in there, sure enough."

"Oh, never mind, Andy! It's not Brownie."

"We'll find out." Andy wrapped Sunny's reins around the fence rail and slipped through the bars. "You don't need to come through all this mud," he said.

But Sally followed. She had no idea of being left alone. They tramped across the corral, and Andy had to stop

several times to keep the mud from pulling his boots off.

When they reached the sagging door, it was so dark that at first Andy could see nothing. It was a low and surprisingly long barn, and as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he saw a partition at the farther end, probably the wall of a box stall.

Suddenly his hopes flared up. What better place could there be to hide a horse like Brownie? Maybe just a few feet away was the solution to the whole mystery. He wanted to plunge back there, to end the worry and suspense that had been gnawing on him for weeks. But the floor was covered with rubbish—old grain boxes, broken harness, and tin cans—forcing him to pick his way slowly through the gloom.

"Brownie!" he whispered. "Hey, Brownie, boy!"

He could hear the horse snuffing at him and pawing the earth, asking to be let out of this gloomy ruin. Andy stumbled over the rubbish, with Sally close behind, and had almost reached the box stall when he heard a sound behind them. He paused and looked over his shoulder.

"Stick up them hands, you two," a grating voice said from the door behind them.



Montana License 3726

Andy felt his heart hit his throat. Sally made a sound between a gasp and a sob, and huddled against the wall.

"Come on, put 'em up!"

Slowly Andy's hands went over his head, and from the corner of his eye he saw Sally's arms in the yellow slicker rising toward the roof.

Behind them, silhouetted against the doorway, stood a tall figure looking down the sights of a double-barreled shotgun, and somehow he knew that this was no fake. Whoever it was would not hesitate to shoot, to blast the end of the barn with a double load of buckshot.

"Come out of there, and keep reaching," the voice said.

Andy slipped in front of Sally, trying to protect her, but anxious, too, to get out of that place, out in the open. He felt cornered, almost smothered in the musty air of the barn. Stumbling toward the doorway, he was so scared he could almost feel the twin barrels in his stomach. Finally, as he reached the entrance and stepped into the open, the

figure with the shotgun retreated, still covering him, and only then did he realize their captor was a woman.

Slowly she lowered the gun, and looked Andy and Sally up and down. She was as tall as most men, and wore old blue jeans and a worn denim shirt. As he looked at her lanky body and lantern jaw, Andy was reminded of a raw-boned horse. Her skin was leathery and brown from working in the sun; there were tired lines around her eyes; but for all her shabbiness, Andy thought there was something proud about the way she carried her head.

"Who are you?" she asked, in that strange hoarse tone.

"I'm Andy Marvin," Andy said, a quaver in his voice. "Wes Marvin's nephew."

"An' you're the girl Wes Marvin adopted, I suppose," she grunted, looking at Sally.

Sally nodded.

"What were you doin' in my barn?"

"We were looking for a horse," Andy said. "A brown gelding."

"Is that so! Well, why don't you come up to the front door and ask for him like a man, if you think I got him?"

"Well, I thought I saw him on one of the buttes, and I trailed him down here." Andy was embarrassed. He had no right in that barn. He knew that if it had been any ranch but Chet's he would never have sneaked around it like a thief. It was just that he was doing detective work, he thought, scouting the place of a man who had almost sent him to jail.

"That ain't any excuse," the woman went on. "I might

have shot you down. I don't stand for no sneak thieves."

"We're sorry," Sally broke in. "We didn't mean anything by it. But Andy really thought he saw the horse."

From the tone of Sally's voice Andy knew that even she thought he was seeing things; even she didn't believe the brown gelding was in that barn.

"We ain't got no brown horses," the woman said. "That's my saddle horse in there. Now get out of here. Get off this place before Chet gets back, or you'll be in trouble."

Andy looked at her sharply. He had heard the change in her voice as she mentioned Chet. It was almost as though for a second she was on their side, protecting them from her husband.

"Thanks, Mrs. Myers," he said. "We were wrong not to ask you first before coming in here. I'm sorry."

"Maybe so, but get out of here now," she answered.

The horse in the barn nickered, and brought a doubt back to Andy's mind. Suppose it was Brownie? It still could be. He hadn't seen the animal, and Mrs. Myers might be lying. How could he tell?

Mrs. Myers took a step forward, waving the gun. "Get going," she grated. "Move on out of here."

With Sally at his heels, Andy started reluctantly across the corral toward Sunny. Curiosity was pounding his brain again. He wanted to stall, argue, anything to look at that horse only a few feet away. Yet how could you argue with a double-barreled shotgun?

Reaching the fence, he slowly unwound Pint's reins and

gave them to Sally, meantime keeping his eyes on the barn. There was a window, a small dark opening in that box stall. If he could just see in; prove that Brownie was in there. . . .

"Come on, Andy," Sally whispered. "Get on your horse. Let's go."

"Quit stallin'." Mrs. Myers's gun came up to a ready position. "I said I ain't got your horse and that's that."

Andy dropped his reins across Sunny's neck and swung into the saddle as deliberately as he dared. If only he could see in that window!

He rode around the edge of the corral and pulled up in front of Mrs. Myers.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Myers, that I've caused you trouble," he said, "but my Uncle Wes is awfully anxious to find this horse. Are you dead certain that the horse in the barn is the one you think it is?"

"Of course. I know my own cavvy. Now move along, and tell your Uncle Wes to keep his children off my place."

As she spoke, Andy's eyes were still on the barn window, but he could think of no way to delay further. He turned his pony, and he and Sally started back toward the yard with the woman walking behind them.

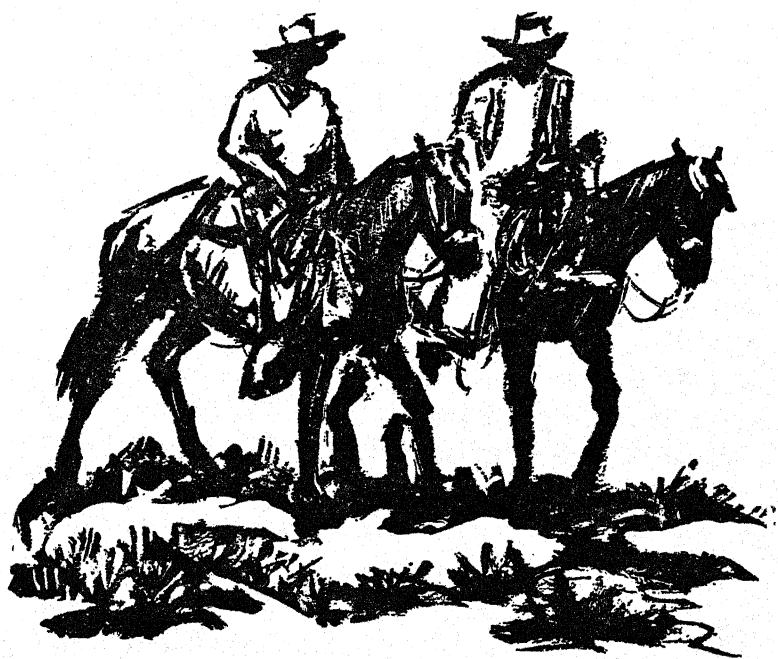
The horse in the barn, hearing the retreating steps, nickered loudly, and Sunny answered.

Andy spun in the saddle, his eyes on the window. For a second he saw a horse's nose pushing its way through the hole. Then his heart sank. "Wrong again," he thought.

The pony's nose was white.



HOW COULD YOU ARGUE WITH



A DOUBLE-BARRELED SHOTGUN?

Several hours later, Andy, dressed in his Eastern clothes, sat in the diner of the North Coast Limited. For once he had little appetite, and leaning his head on his hand he gazed through the window and watched the dark blue mountains that he loved disappearing to the south.

Even though he knew that Sunny would follow him East and that he would see Sally at the rodeo, he felt frustrated and unhappy. This year he had left with the story unfinished. Where was the elusive Brownie? Were Chet and Red horse thieves? And what was the matter with him, Andy? He never used to make mistakes like this about horses.

Even now, looking through the window, he could see a horse that, without too much imagination, might be the phantom buckner.

The highway paralleled the railroad tracks, and on it Andy saw a car pulling a trailer. It was dusk; the driver had just turned on his lights, but in the trailer Andy could see the head and shoulders of a horse. And it looked like a brown.

Andy shook his head sadly. "Maybe I better have a doctor look at my eyes when I get back to New York," he thought. He had a piece of steak halfway to his mouth, and he paused, the fork in mid-air. The road slid suddenly nearer the tracks where he could view the horse better—and it certainly was brown. It had the same type of head, too, and a Roman nose. If he wasn't so suspicious of himself he would say it was Brownie, without a doubt.

The road, starting a rise toward a bridge, curved toward

the tracks. The car and trailer, spinning along, drew nearer and nearer. Andy could not see the men in the cab, but he kept his eyes on the horse. Why couldn't it be Brownie? Surely he could tell his own horse this close, even through a train window. And if it was Brownie, where was he going and why?

The road bent sharply, rose steeply, and Andy leaned forward staring. The license! If he could get the license number. . . . Wyoming . . . no, Montana . . . three . . . seven . . . two . . . six. . . . The car flashed upward, as the road swung onto the bridge above the train.

Andy rushed across the aisle and watched the road appear again on the other side. But there was no sign of the car and the trailer. It had dropped behind, or stopped, or—Andy grinned to himself—had it ever existed?

Was he dreaming things again?

The Mysterious Radiogram

*A*LTHOUGH SALLY MARVIN had been in the air for several hours, she still felt as though she had been transported suddenly to another world—a distant star, perhaps—where everything, including herself, was different.

Looking out of the window from her comfortable seat on the Northwest airliner, she could see the props of the two starboard engines, whirring white disks in the moonlight. The angry red of the exhaust glowed behind them, and the wing itself was a slash of silver hanging over nothing. The humming sound of the engines beat gently on her ears, and she lay back in her chair, feeling lost somewhere between the moon and the earth—a very young girl, a long way from home.

It was almost as though her mind couldn't keep up with her body, she thought. Her mind was still back in the Rockies where she knew every fold of the hills, and every sunlit peak was a personal friend. Yet here was her body racing across the earth—at better than two hundred and fifty miles an hour, the pilot said. Her father and mother, Pint, the pinto colt—everything and everybody she had

known and loved had been left behind in a roar of motors.

Even her clothes felt strange. She was so used to blue jeans and cow boots that the smart little brown suit, the white shirtwaist, the tiny little alligator shoes, and the red beanie made her self-conscious. She wondered if she looked as out of place as she felt. What would Andy think of her when he saw her for the first time in dude clothes? How would she compare with the girls he knew in New York?

She wished she could appear first in the rodeo clothes she had in her suitcase—the fancy split skirt with fringe, the dress cow boots with inlaid butterfly designs, and the snappy new Stetson. But you couldn't wear such an outfit in an apartment on Fifth Avenue.

Another problem was no pockets—no place to carry a jackknife or anything. Everything had to go in a handbag, which would be so easy to lose! Hurriedly she felt for it where it was pushed down alongside the seat. She opened the bag to make sure her pocketbook with her money, the Fifth Avenue address of the Bennetts, her compact, and everything were there. It certainly was going to be hard to remember the darned thing!

In front of her the door to the pilot's cabin opened and the pilot himself, a good-looking young man, gazed inquiringly through it. Then spying Sally, he walked down the aisle to her seat. "You Miss Sally Marvin?" he asked.

She nodded, blushing a little, self-consciously.

"Got a radiogram for you," he said, smiling at her and passing her a piece of paper.

"Thanks," Sally said, trying to smile back. She couldn't help wondering what he thought of her. Did she look as foolish as she felt, clutching her bag?

He grinned at her, "You certainly look as though you had a wonderful summer," he said.

Sally was embarrassed. "What . . . what do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, you look so brown and healthy," he went on. "Not like most of the young girls I see, all daubed up with lipstick and powder and stuff. Just shows what a summer on a dude ranch can do for you."

Sally's laugh echoed up and down the cabin. He thought she was an Easterner! He thought she was a dudine from a fancy guest outfit. "I must look all right in these clothes after all," she thought. And suddenly she felt wonderful.

"What's the joke?" the pilot asked.

"Simply that I'm no dude," she chuckled. "I'm a little old country girl from so far up the South Fork that you almost have to take a pack outfit to find me."

The pilot's roar made her feel better than ever. "Well, I should have guessed," he said. "Wyoming girls can wear anything from blue jeans to evening dress and look like a million bucks. I ought to know, I was born and brought up in Cheyenne."

After he had left, she sighed happily, and opened the message. CAN'T MAKE THE AIRPORT, she read. MEET ME AT—and it gave the address of a hotel on Eighth Avenue. It was signed, MARVIN.

Sally scratched under a blond curl. She had never received a radiogram before in her life, and she supposed that maybe they had to be formal. But somehow this just didn't sound quite like Andy. Why, for instance, did he sign his name "Marvin" instead of "Andy," the way he did in his letters? And anyway he had already written her that he would not be able to meet her at the airport. He wouldn't get in from his school in Connecticut in time. She was supposed to go to the Bennetts' apartment—where she was to be their guest.

Sally slumped in her seat and looked vaguely at the ceiling. She was sleepy. It was getting late for a ranch girl; it was after nine o'clock. She remembered as she thought about it, that Andy had said that Madison Square Garden was on Eighth Avenue. And that the cowboys lived in hotels as near as possible to the arena. That was probably it. Andy wasn't going to waste any time. They were going to meet Shorty and lots of other rodeo hands, and then go to the Garden and see Sunny and the horse she was to ride in the parade. She had decided not to send Pint East for a single week end. As she worked out the probable solution, she forgot the strangeness of the message. She went back to the thought that she needn't worry. She looked all right in her Eastern clothes. Andy would like them. They were going to the World's Champion Rodeo. . . . She saw herself riding in the parade. The band was playing. Her horse was a golden palomino with a silver mane. The crowd applauded as the horse tossed his head,

because he was the most beautiful horse of all . . . and she . . . She could tell from the way Andy watched her. She looked pretty cute herself. . . .

She felt someone shake her arm, and opening her eyes she saw the stewardess leaning over her. "We're coming into New York," she said.

The sign in front of her glowed, "No Smoking . . . Fasten Seat Belts," and as she tightened the webbing across her middle, she heard the motors change their pitch, and the strange groaning sound as the pilot lowered his landing gear.

Glancing out the window, she saw that they were flying low over miles and miles of streets and houses with dirty-looking yards. All the houses looked the same, and sometimes whole rows of them seemed to be attached together in strings.

So this was the East—the big city! She wondered what kids did all cramped up in houses like that, with no fields, no mountains, no horses, no clean air full of the scent of pine trees and sagebrush. She was glad, she thought suddenly, mighty glad she was only here for a visit. It was exciting to look down from a comfortable seat and see how people lived in the city—but it would be horrible to live among them, to be squeezed up like cattle in a box car.

The plane landed gently, and purred across the field, until at last the door opened, and Sally followed the other passengers across to the big limousine that would take her into the terminal in New York. Now that she was on the

ground with the sound of the engines fading in her ears, she felt small and lonely again. Looking out of the car window she watched the grimy factories, the crowded tenements pass by, and for a moment she almost wished she hadn't come.

When she reached the terminal she decided to check her bag, and come back for it later. If Andy were at this hotel on Eighth Avenue he would want to go from there right over to the Garden, she thought. He would want to see Sunny, and maybe then, when she was among the cowboys and the ponies, she wouldn't have this sinking, scared sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Clutching the radiogram in one hand and her handbag in the other, she climbed into a taxi and gave the driver the hotel address. The cab jumped away from the curb and she cowered back in a corner of the seat. Never had she seen so many people and heard so much noise. She felt squeezed in with a mass of cabs and busses at the bottom of the highest canyon in the world. As the cab whipped in and out of the traffic, she wondered why they weren't smashed to pieces in every block.

It took some time to cross town, and as nothing dangerous happened, Sally gradually began to feel less frightened. Her natural curiosity made her watch the passing crowds and stare at the tall buildings. She recognized Times Square from movies she had seen, and by the time the taxi slid in front of the shoddy-looking hotel, she had regained her natural calm.

But when she walked into the gloomy lobby filled with

worn velvet-covered chairs and half-dead potted palms, there was a slight frown between her eyes. It certainly was a strange place to meet anybody. A few men sat glumly on an old sofa near the desk, chewing cigars. A fat man, the desk clerk, leaned on his counter and gnawed on a toothpick. She brightened a little when she noticed a cowboy, Stetson, boots, and all, talking with the girl at the cigarette counter. But she still felt unhappy, afraid, and suspicious—as though something unpleasant were about to happen and she couldn't figure out what it was.

She went to the desk and asked for Andy. The man with the toothpick told her she was expected and was to go to room 203.

She took the elevator, then walked down a dark hall. The ratty red carpet, the fly-specked bulbs lighting the dingy corridor, and the red sign at the end reading, "Fire Exit," all added to her feeling of foreboding as though behind this row of doors some danger waited. She stood for a moment in front of room 203 wondering if she should go back to the lobby and call the Bennetts first. In the dim light she read the message again and there was the name of the place spelled out. The clerk had expected her. There simply couldn't have been a mistake!

Sally raised her fist and thumped the door panel.

Dimly she heard a voice say, "Come in." She opened the door and stepped inside.

It was a shabby room with a few chairs, a bed, a small writing desk, and one grimy window that looked out on a court. For a few seconds there was no sound—then sud-

denly the door slammed behind her. Turning, she saw a lanky, rawboned figure in blue jeans leaning against the panel.

"Mrs. Myers," Sally gasped. "What in the—"

Mrs. Myers jerked her thumb at the nearest chair. "Set," she said. "You're goin' to be here quite a spell."

"I was just going to meet Andy Marvin and Mr. Bennett," Sally mumbled. "But I guess they're not here and I'll—"

"I know," Mrs. Myers cut in, and reaching behind her, she locked the door and put the key in her pocket.

Now the fear that she had been holding back, the suspicion that something dreadful was going to happen, flooded over her. The tall buildings, the grime and soot, the thousands of people milling through the streets of the largest city in the world had scared her. But to be locked in this dirty room with its stale air, its dirty window, and its feeling of being closed in was too much. Sally felt her throat tighten. She wanted to scream and beat her way out of this place.

She rushed toward the door. "Let me out of here," she choked. "Unlock that door!"

At the same instant, Mrs. Myers's long arms reached out. Her big palms, brown and hard as rock, pushed Sally back across the room and into the chair. "I said set *down!*" the woman rasped.

Sally sat. She felt her hands shaking and she clenched them trying to pull herself together. She thought hard about her mother and dad, the mountains, the ranges, Pint.

She remembered how Wes would say, "Take it easy, girl," when she got overexcited. "Stay in the saddle, honey!"

Gradually she calmed down. "Stay in the saddle," she repeated to herself. "Let's figure this out."

Finally she glanced up at Mrs. Myers who had moved back in front of the door. "After all," Sally thought, "this old gal is tough and maybe mean, but she's not a city woman. She comes from the South Fork, too. Her ranch is only a mile from ours. She can't be so different from me."

The woman was watching her shrewdly, waiting to see how she would take it.

"Look here, Mrs. Myers," Sally said, trying to keep her voice calm. "What's the idea of locking that door? What are you trying to get away with?" Immediately, she felt better, and her voice gathered strength. "I must be in the wrong room. I'll have to ask you to get out of my way." She started to rise.

"Set still an' listen to me," Mrs. Myers grated. "Don't make me do nothin' bad, Sally Marvin. I ain't aimin' to hurt you. But you got to stay here, see? An' real quietly, too."

Feeling a little faint, Sally dropped her eyes. Things were moving too fast for her. She couldn't understand what it was all about, but she decided she would have to take it slowly and try to worm an explanation out of Mrs. Myers gradually.

"Why are you threatening me, Mrs. Myers?" she said at last. "Aren't you taking a big chance? When Andy Marvin

misses me he'll turn the town inside out. Sooner or later you'll meet the police."

Mrs. Myers jackknifed her body into a chair by the door. "He won't cause no trouble," she said. "Matter of fact, Mr. Andy Marvin'll be here, too, any minute."

Mrs. Myers Shows Her Hand

SALLY DREW IN her breath sharply. So Andy was in this, too! The radiogram must have been a fake all right. Had Andy received one like it? And was he this very minute walking into the same trap?

"What goes, Mrs. Myers?" she asked. "If you're going to hold me here, you must have a reason."

A strange, bitter look crossed Mrs. Myers's face. "Sure," she said, nodding her head slowly. "I've got a reason. For years I've seen you and your father and your mother and that kid from the East ridin' up and down in a fancy station wagon. An' I've seen your mother all dressed up pretty, goin' into town for the big society shindigs. But me—I never had no money for things like that." The color rose in her face, and she went on speaking with growing excitement. "No, sir! I had no fun. I set there on the ranch day after day, year after year. Most of the time I was alone, too. Chet was off gallivantin' around or holdin' short-time jobs and then spendin' all the money. I got a reason all right. . . ." She paused and her glare roved over Sally from the tips of her tiny shoes to the top

of her golden head. "You think you look pretty cute in all them fancy duds, don't you?" she said.

Sally was caught off guard by the change in pace of Mrs. Myers's talk. "Why . . . yes," she said. "I . . . I look all right, I guess."

"You *guess*, huh! Well me, I never had any clothes as good as that in my whole life."

"I don't see what that has to do with locking me up in this . . . this hole," Sally said.

"Maybe you don't," Mrs. Myers answered. "But that won't hurt you none. And by keepin' you here, I'll be able to get *me* some good clothes, and maybe I'll get to drive up and down in a fancy car, an' go to town to see the pictures. *That's* why I'm doin' this job. An' that's why you're goin' to stay here until I say you can leave."

As though she had come to the end of the record and had lifted the needle, Mrs. Myers shut her mouth, withdrew into herself, and sat as still as an Indian, her cold eyes watching Sally with all the expression of a pair of steel beads.

Sally stared back. She still didn't understand what it was all about. But she was beginning to figure out Mrs. Myers, and she found she couldn't stay angry with this pathetic scarecrow of a woman. "The poor old gal has never had any clothes or fun," Sally thought. "By holding me here, some way or other she figures she is going to make some money and have a chance to spend it." But how? Surely she didn't expect to get away with a kidnapping!

"I don't think you realize what you're doing," Sally said

at last. "You're breaking the law because—" She was interrupted by a loud knock on the door.

Mrs. Myers rose slowly from her chair, and Sally, wondering whether it was Andy, got ready to shout a warning.

But Mrs. Myers evidently knew who it was. Unlocking the door, she opened it part way, and through it pushed the burly figure of Chet.

"The other kid here yet?" he asked, ignoring Sally.

Mrs. Myers shook her head.

"Huh! That's queer. I figgered he'd get here first. . . . Well, keep this one quiet," he said. "I don't want no noise at all. I'm going down the hall and wait. I'll tail young Marvin here and make sure he don't make a break for it."

Seeing that he was about to leave, Sally went into action. "What are you trying to get away with, Chet Myers?" she yelled, bouncing out of her chair. "If you hold me or Andy here, you'll go to jail. Don't you know that?"

Chet swung around. "Be quiet!" he said.

"I won't be quiet. I'm going to yell so loud the roof'll shake if you don't let me out this very minute."

Sally took a deep breath and was about to turn loose a healthy scream when Chet slapped her across the jaw and sent her staggering across the room against the farther wall.

"I said be quiet," he snarled and turned to his wife. "Tie her and gag her if she bawls," he ordered, and walked out of the room.

Mrs. Myers locked the door and turned to Sally. "Don't yell," she said urgently. "It won't do no good. He had no right to hit you, but don't yell."

Sally, still dazed from the blow, her cheek bright red where Chet had hit her, slumped into her chair again. She wanted to clear her head, to think things out before trying to make another move. Perhaps she should make one mighty effort, yell, scream, and fight Mrs. Myers. Surely somebody would hear and come to help her. Yet, glancing up at the big figure by the door, she knew she was no match for the tough, rawboned rancher's wife.

For a long time neither one spoke. Outside it had grown darker, and Sally, trying to figure some way out, watched the misty rain dribbling down the wall across the areaway and down the black iron railing of the fire escape. If she were alone, she thought, she could open the window and run down the long steps that zigzagged to the courtyard below. But with Mrs. Myers sitting there, ready to spring, she wouldn't have a chance.

If only she could convince Mrs. Myers that she was committing a crime, that Chet was leading her into danger.

Sally put her elbows on her knees and dropped her chin into her hands and said, "Gee, Mrs. Myers, are you doing this just because you need money? Maybe if you let me out, my dad or Mr. Bennett would help Chet get a good job and make money without committing a crime."

"Aw, there ain't no real crime," Mrs. Myers moved uneasily in her chair. "We ain't goin' to hurt anybody. Chet said it would be O.K."

"Kidnapping is a crime, all right," Sally said, looking at her sharply. Maybe this would get under her skin and frighten her.

"Don't try to scare me, girl," Mrs. Myers said. But Sally thought she was scared—just a little.

"Chet doesn't know about the Eastern laws, you know."

"Shut up." Mrs. Myers glared at Sally, then buttoned her thin mouth into a narrow seam.

Again there was a long pause. Sally could hear the rain pattering on the fire escape. She thought of Chet down the hall waiting, of Andy walking into the hotel lobby below them. Would he realize something was wrong and call the police?

"This Mr. Bennett," Sally said, trying another tack, "is very fond of Andy and me. We saved his son's life last summer. I bet you I could get him to take us down to one of the big stores, you know, on Fifth Avenue. And he would get you a lovely suit, and an Eastern hat, and a bag and shoes and—"

"I said shut up!" Mrs. Myers rose to her feet. Her face twisted with emotion. "I don't like keepin' you here. I don't like the whole business any more than you do. But I told Chet I'd give him this one chance to make some money and I'm a-goin' to do it, see?"

Sally stood up, too. "I do see, Mrs. Myers," she said. "Truly I do. But there is something wrong about it. You'll never really be happy because this is a crime you're committing, don't you understand?"

Sally put out her hand and tried to touch Mrs. Myers's arm, but the woman stepped back. "It's too late," she said.

"What's too late?"

"I don't understand it all myself," Mrs. Myers said. "I know Chet an' Red got their hands on a lot of money. But that's all they'll tell me. They say you an' young Marvin can spoil the deal someway."

Sally's mind was spinning. How could they spoil anything? It didn't make sense.

Mrs. Myers swallowed hard. "What am I talkin' about?" she muttered. "I said I'd keep my mouth shut."

Once again there was silence except for the dripping of the rain, but Sally thought she had made some progress. Mrs. Myers sat by the door, crossing and uncrossing her long legs, and every now and then Sally saw her knit her brows slightly, as though worried. "It's her conscience," Sally thought. "She doesn't trust Chet, really. And she's beginning to realize how wrong she is."

Sally didn't know how long she had been sitting in this dreary room, but it seemed like weeks. As she watched Mrs. Myers, hour after hour, the woman grew more and more restless. Every so often she would get up and pace the floor, or stare out the window. Sally could see that her mind was working, worrying about the crime she was committing. Sally thought that Mrs. Myers would let her go—if she wasn't afraid of Chet.

Fog swirled outside in the courtyard now, and Sally could hear the deep mournful whistles of the tugboats and ships on the river, calling to each other through the mist, warning of danger.

Suddenly, Mrs. Myers seemed to come to some decision. She stood up and pointed to a door that led to a con-

necting room. Her face was expressionless, her eyes as cold as ever, yet somehow Sally knew that Mrs. Myers was trying to tell her something—something very important. All she said was "I'm goin' in there a second to get me a smoke. Don't try nothin'," and she walked out of the room.

For just a moment, Sally sat as though frozen. This was the one chance. Should she make a break for the door? No, it was locked, and anyway she would run into Chet down the hall. The window! The fire escape—that was it! She leaped up, ran to the streaming pane, and jamming her fingers under the sash, she pushed with all her might. For some reason, after moving up an inch or two, it jammed and stuck crookedly in the frame. She couldn't wait. She could hear Mrs. Myers coming.

Sally picked up the chair she had been sitting in, and poising it above her head, she threw it with all her strength at the window. The glass crashed wildly in the silence. She heard Mrs. Myers shout, and without waiting she plunged through the hole. She heard the coat of her suit rip, but she felt no pain. She grabbed for the railing of the fire escape. In the sudden darkness her eyes barely made out the glistening iron steps below. The roar of the city seemed to well up around her; the darkness engulfed her, and her fear returned. But hearing sounds behind her, she plunged down the steps into the dark.

Frantic Search

EARLIER THAT EVENING, Andy Marvin sat in Mr. Bennett's apartment waiting for Sally. When she didn't appear, he assumed that the plane must be late, and he wished he had been able to go to the airport. Mr. Bennett came in from his work and found Andy fidgeting around in the living room, pretending to listen to the radio. Knowing that they would go right to the Garden to see Shorty and the horses, Andy was wearing blue jeans and cowboy boots, and his steel-rimmed heels clicked on the floor.

"Where's Sally?" Mr. Bennett asked.

"Must be late," Andy said. "I'll call the airport. The plane was due quite a while ago. It may be grounded somewhere."

"Pardon me, sir." A butler walked into the room with a piece of paper in his hand. "There is a telegram for Mr. Marvin. It was stuffed under the door. They must have telephoned while I was out, sir."

"Thanks a lot," Andy said, eagerly grabbing the paper. "This will tell the story, Mr. Bennett." He unfolded the slip and read: CONNECTED UP WITH SOME OF THE BOYS

FROM HOME MEET ME AT—and it gave the address of a hotel on Eighth Avenue.

Andy passed the telegram to Mr. Bennett without a word. He was surprised and a little hurt at Sally. After all, she was Mr. Bennett's guest, he thought, and she should have come here first because that was good manners. Also, Andy admitted to himself, he thought she would want to see *him*, maybe. The whole thing was rather unlike Sally.

He reached for his hat lying on a chair, and looked at Mr. Bennett, who only smiled and said, "Well, she hasn't had a crack-up or anything. Don't look so down in the mouth. Go find her and bring her back here for dinner."

Andy grinned, thanked Mr. Bennett, and ran for the door.

But after hailing a taxi and heading downtown, Andy began to worry again. Something was wrong with that telegram. For one thing, it had been sent from the airport. Why hadn't Sally phoned if she wanted to change her plans? Who were the boys she had met? The rodeo had been on for weeks; it wouldn't be any of the contestants.

Andy tried to tell himself that he was being silly or jealous or something, but as the cab moved west and into the grimy section of Eighth Avenue, Andy knew something was wrong, and by the time he had reached the hotel he felt sure Sally was in trouble. He could almost *feel* her trying to warn him.

One look at the hotel told him it was no place for her, although as he pushed through the revolving door two rodeo hands passed him. Both of them hollered, "Hi, cow-

boy!" but Andy didn't answer. He was too busy sizing up the lobby.

Slowly he walked over to the desk. The clerk, chewing a toothpick, was lost in the comic pages of a newspaper.

"Excuse me," Andy said. "But is there a message for Andy Marvin?" The clerk looked up, picked up a card stuck in the corner of the desk blotter, and said, "Uh-huh. Go to room 203," and went back to his paper.

Andy turned from the desk and was just starting for the elevator when a cowboy burst from it and rushed across the lobby toward the entrance. He was almost running and his high heels on the tile floor sounded like a horse on cobblestones.

The clerk looked up from the desk and yelled, "Hey!" pointing to Andy. But Andy ducked behind a potted palm. His heart was beating fast, his mind racing. That was Chet Myers going through the door! Looking through the big plate-glass window that faced the street, Andy saw the man reach the sidewalk and break into a run.

For a moment, Andy stood stock still. The clerk had connected him with Chet. That meant that Mr. Chet Myers was connected with room 203—and *Sally!* Through Andy's mind flashed a memory of the trip up Hardpan Mesa, and how Chet seemed to be the man behind Red, the brain of whatever was going on. Had Chet lured him down here? Was room 203 a trap?

Andy looked through the palm leaves at the desk clerk. He seemed absorbed once again in his comics. Sliding along behind some pillars, the cigarette counter, and an

old settee, Andy reached the elevator. The next time the doors opened he stepped inside and said, "Two, please."

On the second floor, Andy stepped out and stood listening. Somewhere down the hall he heard a radio playing, and someone was arguing violently in the room across from him. Standing there in the semidarkness, Andy tried to figure out which way the numbers ran so that he could find room 203. Cautiously he crept down the hall—room 208, 207. . . .

He stopped again. That must be 203 down there, he thought. He waited, listening for sounds of familiar voices. But only the radio crooned along, and it seemed to Andy that his heart beat faster and louder than the music.

Cautiously, he crept up on room 203, and as he slid up to the door frame, he realized that the door itself was slightly open. Putting his ear to the crack, he listened once again—then slowly he stepped into the room.

It was empty, and Andy was halfway across it, when the door slammed suddenly behind him. He jumped and swung around, his heart in his mouth—but there was no one. It was only the wind.

Turning, he saw the jagged hole in the window, the glass strewn over the floor, and the chair lying on its side. Rain blew through the broken pane, ruffling the curtains, spattering a little on the floor.

He crossed and looked down the fire escape. The foggy drizzle sifted down on the cement below; a stray cat, hunting for food, slithered behind a garbage can—but there was no sign of human life.

Andy took a deep breath of the moist air and turned back toward the room. If he could find some clue as to who lived there. . . . Was it Chet, Red, or someone else? Suddenly his gaze fell on a smart handbag lying on the table. At first it meant nothing, but then, gradually, fear rose in him and he knew he had been right. Sally was in danger! On the side of the handbag, in gold letters, were the initials S.M.—Sally Marvin!

A few minutes before, when Sally had reached the bottom of the fire escape, she had heard Mrs. Myers yelling at Chet, and then the sound of the big woman's feet on the iron rungs above.

Sally raced across the court, past lighted windows, past the garbage cans and ash barrels, and into the only exit—a long cement tunnel that ran through the middle of the building. Reaching an alley, she slowed down and started walking toward the street at its farther end. Somehow, she wasn't afraid of Mrs. Myers behind her. Sally had a feeling that when the woman left the room, she was giving her a chance to make a break for it. Mrs. Myers wasn't such a bad old girl at heart.

Sally reached the corner of the alley that led into the street, and looking back she saw Mrs. Myers coming out of the tunnel, a lanky shadow in the light of the single bulb in the wall above. Sally waited, hiding in the shadows until she saw Mrs. Myers look up the alley in the opposite direction, then she ducked around the corner into the street.

Suddenly she saw the burly form of Chet bearing down

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behind her. She gasped and started to run. He shouted something, and she felt terror rising in her again. She plunged down the cross street toward the crowds swirling along Broadway. She didn't know that it was Broadway, or that if she had turned in the other direction she would have been back on Eighth Avenue and would have seen the lights of Madison Square Garden at Fiftieth Street. Her one idea was to get away, to lose herself in the crowd.

As she dove into the jostling mob, a number of persons stopped to watch her, and turned to stare at the big Westerner in pursuit. But nobody did anything. Nobody offered to help, or made a move to stop her. It wasn't like Wyoming, where people for fifty miles around were neighbors. Sally plunged into the crowd as though it were a mountain stream where her tracks would be lost, and scourged by her terror, she took chances, crossed streets against the lights, and beat her way against people coming from the other direction. She felt as though she were in a nightmare—fighting against a river of bodies. The traffic, the noise, the great neon flashes splashing in a great tangle above her confused her, and as she pushed her way up Broadway, she met more crowds pouring from the side streets, swirling into the masses on Times Square like streams flowing into a great sea.

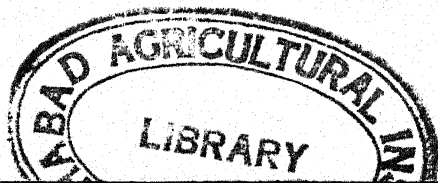
Finally, Sally turned into one of the side streets and plowed her way past several theater marquees until the crowds began to slacken. Then, as soon as she was able, she broke into a run again and drove herself until her wind was

gone. At last, when her legs were so tired she could hardly stand, she stopped by an orangeade stand and looked behind her. There was no sign of Chet Myers. She leaned against the wall, panting.

Gradually her breath returned, and she found herself on a wide avenue full of trucks and busses. Grimy little stores, pawnshops, cigar stands, and an occasional drugstore lined the sidewalks. The orangeade stand looked dirty, and although she was thirsty, she had no desire to order a drink. She decided to walk to the nearest drugstore and have some coffee.

It was then—just as her nerves were quieting down—that she realized something was wrong. She had forgotten something. Was it part of her dude clothes, or that fool hat she was wearing? She felt the beanie, damp and flattened on her head. Then she remembered: her bag—with her pocketbook, her money, Mr. Bennett's address!

For the first time in all her life, Sally felt completely helpless. Used to looking after herself in the hills—spunky, reliant, ready for anything—Sally had never had to depend on money. Except when she was in town, she often went months without a nickel in her jeans. She was used to loneliness, too, riding the great mountains for days with only a horse for company. But now, surrounded by eight million people in the largest city in the world, Sally looked up and down the dark avenue and felt so scared and lonely that she pulled back into the shadows and hid in a doorway, shivering, hanging onto an old bit of iron railing to keep her knees from buckling.



It had stopped raining, but wisps of fog hung low over the buildings and swirled around distant corners. The traffic lights were alternate red and green blurs above a shiny wet pavement, and the few people on the sidewalks were walking fast, being obviously in a hurry to get indoors. As they passed the lights of the orangeade stand, Sally caught a glimpse of their faces, and she wondered whether someone nice-looking might come by—someone she dared ask for help and information. But every face seemed taut and nervous, as though each person had worries of his own and had no wish to help a girl standing in a doorway.

After a while, Sally found her knees were strong again, and she began to give herself a talking to. So she had lost her pocketbook! That was tough; it was like being out in the mountains and finding you didn't have any matches. But you didn't just sit on a rock and cry like a baby. It was like losing your horse, too, and being left afoot somewhere in the badlands. But even then you didn't wait for someone else to help you. So why stand here like a scared puppy now? What would Dad think? And Andy? Maybe Chet had caught up with Andy, too. This was no time to act like a sissy. Maybe Andy was in trouble.

Sally straightened up, pushed her beanie forward at a rakish angle and stepped into the street. Right then she not only wished for her money and the address book—she wanted her cute little hand mirror and a dash of lipstick. "Somehow, I've got to borrow a nickel," she thought. "Then I can telephone the Bennetts."

She walked into the drugstore on the corner, patting her

damp hair and trying to smile. She saw only one man—a young blond boy in a white coat leaning on the soda fountain. He was humming a tune to himself and beating out the rhythm with a pair of long-handled soda spoons.

Shyly, Sally walked up to the fountain, sat on a stool, and waited until the boy caught her eye. He stopped drumming on the counter, and shoving back a wild lock of hair, walked toward her. "What'll it be, sis?" he asked, and Sally thought he had a nice grin. "We got chocolate, strawberry, walnut sundaes, sodas, banana splits—all sorts of terrible stuff."

"I—" Sally blushed. "I don't want anything, thanks. I wonder—" she stopped. Gee, it sure was hard to ask for money, she thought.

"I tell you." The boy leaned his elbows on the counter. "Maybe you'd like to try my special. I use maple-walnut ice cream, and on it I put chocolate first, then strawberry, then butterscotch, then walnut syrup and shredded coconut, a dash of licorice, and then on top—get this now—I put an aspirin tablet in place of a cherry. That's in case the sundae don't make you feel so good." He watched her and in spite of herself she smiled.

"That's very wise of you," she said. "I'd like to try one maybe only you see, the trouble is—I've—I've lost my handbag. I'm broke. I'm lost, too, and I need a nickel to call my friends on the phone."

Immediately, a look of sympathy crossed the boy's face. "Gee," he said. "You poor kid. Why didn't you say so?" He looked her over carefully, cocking his head to one side

like a bird. "You need a cup of hot coffee first. Then, if you drink it all, I'll give you the nickel. O.K.?"

Sally smiled. "That's awfully nice of you," she said. "As soon as my friends come for me, I'm sure I can pay you back."

"Aw shucks, forget it." The boy swung around and deftly shoved a cup under the big nickel boiler, filled it with coffee, and slid it under Sally's nose. "I bet from the way you talk you come from some place out West," he said.

Sally poured some sugar into the cup and sampled the steaming brew. It wasn't much as coffee, she thought. Any camp cook could do better, but it was hot, bracing, and gave courage with every sip. "I'm from South Fork, Wyoming," she said. "I'm a ranch girl, and this town scares me to death."

"Gee." The boy leaned far over the counter. "All my life I wanted to be a cowboy. I go to every cowboy picture. I listen on the radio. And whenever I can, I go to the rodeo."

While Sally drank the coffee, the boy asked questions rapidly as though afraid she would disappear before he could satisfy his curiosity, and Sally told him what she could between sips. When she had finished, he slipped a nickel on the counter. "If you need another, holler," he said.

She thanked him and went to the telephone booth in the back of the store. Bennett . . . she flipped the pages of the phone book. Was his name John A. Bennett or John

T. Bennett? Never mind, he lived somewhere on Fifth Avenue, she remembered, and his number had a six in it, although she wasn't sure whether it began or ended with six. She worked over the phone book for some time and found dozens of John Bennetts, but not a one lived on Fifth Avenue. She worked hard at it, to make sure, checking every name. At last she was convinced. She gazed at the telephone, read the dialing directions, and then realized that she could call Information. She heard the nickel ring through the machine and asked Information for the number.

There was a pause and she stared through the door at the boy. He was busy now. A bunch of men had come in from a print shop, and he was slicing sandwiches deftly, serving coffee, and laughing with his customers. Sally realized that city people weren't as hardhearted as they looked.

"Sorry," Information said suddenly over the telephone. "Mr. Bennett has a private line and we are not allowed to divulge the number." The phone went dead and the nickel clinked out into the little trough below.

Sally felt her shoulders sag. All her tiredness came back, and she wished with all her might that she was back at the ranch, crawling into her bed for a long sleep in the crisp Wyoming air. She wondered if she should ask the soda fountain boy what to do, but seeing all those other men there made her afraid. They would think it strange, her wandering around alone at night. She would do better to slip out and find a policeman.

She left the booth, waved at the boy, and dropped the nickel on the counter. "Thanks," she said. "I didn't have to use it after all."

"Hey, sis!" The boy ran toward her. "Wait a second. Did you get your party?"

All up and down the counter the men looked up, grinning and yelling at the counter boy.

Embarrassed, Sally ducked out the side door into the street. She'd find her way to Fifth Avenue and try some of the apartments, she thought. If that didn't work she would ask a policeman to take care of her. Hurriedly, she took her bearings and saw that she was on Second Avenue. If she walked *that* way, it stood to reason she would reach Fifth. That was west, she felt sure. The noise of the city rumbled around her. A truck roared past as she reached the corner, splashing her legs with dirty water. The fog still hung low making a yellow cave of light, and the eternal traffic lights blinked red . . . green . . . red . . . green. . . . Sally was getting awfully tired.

The Phantom Bronc Again

LATE THAT NIGHT Andy Marvin, clenching and unclenching his fists, stood looking out a window of the Bennett apartment. Outside, through the swirling fog, he could see lights from the buildings across the park. Somewhere out there alone, Sally was wandering, looking for him. Or maybe she was caught again, held in some grimy room like the one he had seen that afternoon. If only he had come in from school sooner, he thought, and picked her up at the airport, everything would have been all right.

In the distance Andy heard the wail of a police car or fire siren. He knew that by now every prowler car and every cop on the beat had an eye out for Sally. Mr. Bennett had gone into immediate action. The Bureau of Missing Persons was notified; Sally's name echoed over the short-wave radio only a few minutes after they realized she was lost. Policemen had come and gone; the District Attorney's Office had called. Patrol cars cruised up and down Fifth Avenue, questioning doormen and passers-by. If it had been anyone but Sally who was in trouble, Andy realized,

he would be enjoying himself. Here was a real mystery, as good as any story he had ever read, and he was part of it.

He kept trying to solve it in his mind. Why had anyone sent him a fake telegram? Who would want to kidnap Sally? Chet Myers? Why? She was not well known; there was no money for ransom—unless someone hoped to get it from Mr. Bennett, who at this minute was down at police headquarters.

"Detective Borland to see you, Mr. Marvin," the butler announced from the door.

Andy turned away from the window, and in spite of himself, he looked surprised. A little man about five feet tall in a worn topcoat and a battered hat came into the room, carrying an umbrella. He had a beaklike nose, sallow cheeks, and looked to Andy more like an aging bank clerk than a detective from one of the finest police forces in the world. He slid out of the coat and gave it and the umbrella to the butler, saying, "Thanks," in a small birdlike voice. Then he glanced at Andy as though seeing him for the first time. "So I don't look the way a detective should?" he snapped, reading the surprise in Andy's eyes. "You want me to look like Sherlock Holmes with a queer hat, a curve-stemmed pipe, and a magnifying glass, eh? Or maybe I should have a derby hat, a trick moustache, and a gun under each shoulder." He flipped open his coat showing no guns whatsoever. "Come now, what did you expect?"

Andy was blushing. "Why, gee, Mr. Borland, I don't know. I thought that maybe like in the movies—"

"Movies!" Borland cut in. "Rubbish. Look here. Why

in the world should a detective look conspicuous? The way you do."

"I—" Andy was rattled. "I look conspicuous?"

"Certainly. Even without that cowboy suit I could pick you out in any crowd as a young prep-school boy with a good family. You've come in for a week end. You're planning on going to the rodeo with your girl friend. At school you're an athlete, probably a football player, right?"

Andy grinned. "Right," he said.

"But you couldn't tell I was a detective, could you?"

"No, I sure couldn't," Andy said.

"Gives me an advantage, right?"

"Right."

Having rattled off all these remarks like a verbal machine gun, the little man dropped into a chair, lit a cigarette, and flipped the match into the fireplace.

"But just the same," he said. "You're the one to clear up this mystery. Not I."

"How can I do it?" Andy was still rattled. "I wish I could find her. Gee, if I could find Sally everything would be—"

"I thought so." The detective cut in.

Andy was so worried that he flared up, "You thought what? What do you want, Mr. Borland?"

"I want *you* to solve the mystery." For the first time a tiny smile flitted under the little man's long nose. "But you won't. You're just like the rest of 'em. Never yet saw one who could use his head."

"One what?" Andy couldn't make head or tail of Mr. Borland.

"Oh, anybody mixed up in a crime. You're an intelligent young man, aren't you, Mr. Marvin?"

"Well, sure—I—I guess so."

"But you're so darn worried over the disappearance of Sally Marvin that you don't think straight, right?"

Andy began to understand. Ruefully, he nodded. "Right," he said. "Yep, you sure are right."

"O.K." Mr. Borland sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. "Now we're getting somewhere. If you want to find Sally Marvin . . . if you want the police to catch up with a man named Chet Myers and put him behind bars where he belongs, you've got to quit worrying long enough to work out the facts. I don't know 'em. All I know is that a fake radiogram found in her handbag lured one Sally Marvin to the room in a hotel occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Chet Myers. Mr. Myers is in some vague way connected with the rodeo. He comes from the same part of the country as Miss Marvin. That I got from Mr. Bennett. The broken window in the hotel room, the fact that, according to Bennett, you saw Myers run through the lobby, makes it look as though she escaped—or at least tried to. She may have been caught outside. She may not. If not, it is high time the police picked her up. But I want Myers—don't you?"

"You can say that again," Andy growled. "I'd sure like to catch up with him. I'd like to—"

"Uh! Uh!" Mr. Borland shook a tiny finger at Andy. "There you go! I believe that you have the key to the mystery—the motive for it right in that noggin of yours.

But you won't be able to find the key if you get excited."

Andy ceased pacing the floor, dropped into a chair, and tried his best to relax. "I'm trying, Mr. Borland," he said. "What do I do first?"

"Give me all the facts you have about Myers."

Andy poured out everything he knew. How Myers didn't like his Uncle Wes. How he had suspected Myers and Red Wilson of stealing his bucking horse, Brownie; how he had followed them and been locked up in the oat bin at the Torrance Ranch. He even told him how he thought he had seen Brownie so many times, and how Mrs. Myers had run them off her place.

When he had finished, Borland said, "Well, then why did Myers try to kidnap Miss Marvin?"

Andy grinned ruefully. "You're the detective," he said.

Mr. Borland ignored it. "Two possible motives," he chirped. "He figured on getting a ransom out of your Uncle Wes or Mr. Bennett. Or . . ." he looked hard at Andy. "It's got something to do with that bucking horse."

"Don't start me on that," Andy said, laughing. "Uncle Wes says I'm nuts on the subject."

"O.K. Be nuts for a moment. I don't think a cowboy would go in for a big-time, superdangerous crime like kidnapping, do you?"

"So far as I know Myers never had a real police record." Andy scratched his head. "But I don't see what Brownie could have to do with this."

"Are you sure he isn't one of the bucking horses at the rodeo?"

"Absolutely," Andy said. "I called Shorty Franklin from school yesterday to ask him to look after my horse, Sunny. I also asked him if he thought Brownie was there, and he said no."

"Franklin is a top rodeo rider, isn't he?"

"Yes. And he's known all over the West for honesty and sportsmanship. He's a real guy, Mr. Borland."

"Would he know this Brownie?"

"You bet. I've given him a description of him—the brand and all. I bet he could tell Brownie at half a mile."

"Well." Detective Borland got up and started looking for his umbrella which the butler had left hanging on a chair. "I'll work from this end to find Miss Marvin. I'll put a man on Red Wilson, too. It may be that Mr. Bennett's money is what interested Myers, after all. I suppose that when Sally Marvin started East her local paper made a story of it."

"I suppose so. She helped save young Tommy Bennett's life, after all. And Uncle Wes is an important man in our part of Wyoming."

Borland held out his hand. "Good-by, Mr. Marvin," he said. "And don't worry too much. I'll do all I can from this end. But I don't know rodeo. I don't know horses. And I don't know cowboys. You do. I still think that if you go over the facts, you'll hit something. The police will have to find Miss Marvin. But knowing the motive for kidnapping would help a lot. And I think the answer is in your head—if you can dig it out." He reached into his vest

pocket and held out a card. "Call that number if you get any ideas."

"I'll do that," Andy said, shaking the tiny hand. But his mind was still whirling with thoughts of Sally wandering in the fog, or caught in some room by the Myerses. . . .

After the little detective had left, Andy paced the room for hours. Mr. Bennett came in and talked with him for a while, then went out again, telling Andy to stay put in case Sally called. For a long time he stood at the window, watching the lights gradually go out in the distant buildings, and when he finally sat down again, the first gray of dawn was a ribbon in the East.

The more he tried to figure out Myers's motives, the more confused he became. He had a vague theory about Brownie, but no proof to back it up, and it had no connection with the kidnapping that he could see. Finally he picked up the previous day's paper and turned to the sports page. What with his school work, football, and editing a school paper, he had made no effort to keep up with the rodeo. The headline read:

FAMOUS BRONC RIDERS FIGHT TO THE FINISH

Shorty Franklin and Red Wilson Tie for First Place

Alongside the story were two pictures. One was a typical shot of a cowboy being bucked sky-high. *Slipstream piles up another rider*, the caption read. *Not a single cowboy has ridden this bronc successfully*. Alongside this was a

second shot of Slipstream standing in the corral with his head down. The caption read: *Looks gentle, doesn't he? Yet he's the greatest bucking horse in the world.*

Andy took a deep breath, and the paper shook in his hand. He was pretty tired, he thought. Maybe he was having delusions or something. But there it was in black and white—he could see the sway-back, the big feet, the Roman nose, and the big gentle eyes. There couldn't be a mistake this time. In spite of Shorty—Slipstream was Brownie!

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Andy Marvin—Amateur Detective

DURING THE NIGHT a wind came up, blowing the fog away, bringing cold air in from the West over the city. It traveled up the empty streets, spinning old newspapers into dirty corners. Over on Ninth Avenue, a milkman threw a blanket over his old white horse. On Eighth Avenue, a policeman held his hands under his armpits to warm them. On Seventh, a little newsboy dropped a brick to hold down his early editions, on which the headlines read:

LITTLE WYOMING GIRL VANISHES IN BIG CITY

Then the western wind hit Central Park, blowing the fall leaves across the grass and ruffling the water in the lake. The bison and the elk, the pronghorned antelope and the mule deer, the animals from the Rocky Mountains, all faced the wind, sniffing the breeze, remembering the open country.

And in a little summerhouse on top of a rock, the young

Wyoming girl lying on a bench shivering, sneezed, and sat up suddenly, a look of fear in her eyes.

For a moment, Sally had no idea where she was. She had been dreaming that she was on a pack trip, and her bedroll had no blanket in it. She had been pulling at an imaginary tarp, trying to get warm and now . . .

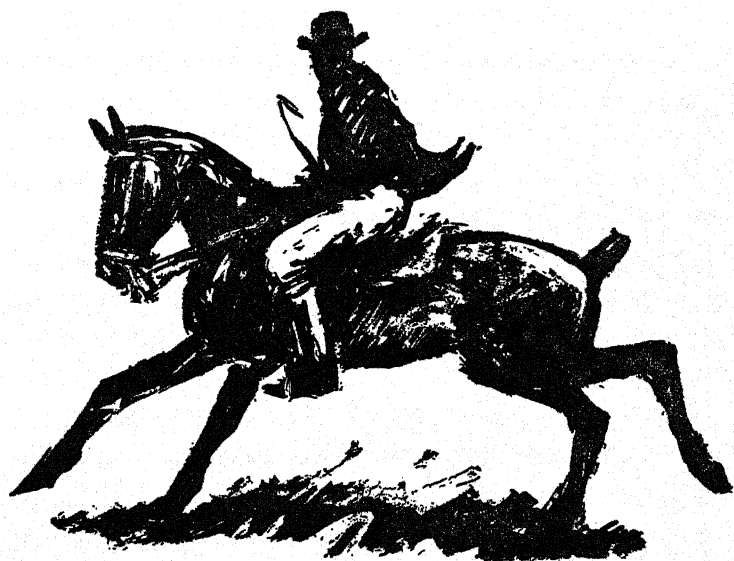
Sally looked around the silly little wooden house, and remembrance came back to her. She had walked toward Fifth Avenue, hoping to meet a policeman, but none was in sight. Then, on reaching Fifth, she had seen the park where the high buildings gave way to grass and trees.

For the first time since the plane landed, she saw an open space with no tall buildings leaning over her, no crowds, no miles of cement, no rushing cars. Sally climbed over the wall and wandered into the woods. Just the softness of the turf under her feet made her feel better. Walking along she saw the little summerhouse on the rocks above, and she decided to sit in it a while and try to collect her thoughts.

No longer afraid, she scrambled up the slope and lay down on one of the wooden benches that circled the building. In the distance she heard the roar of the city, and she could see the lights of the skyscrapers against the sky, but it all seemed far-off. In a moment, she decided, she would simply go to a police station. She could find one of *those* in the telephone book, she thought. But first, for just a moment, she would rest. She closed her eyes, and dropped into an exhausted sleep.

Now, as the sun peeped over a high tower to the east,

she stood up and found she could hardly walk. Strong legs used to climbing mountains or running through the sagebrush had tired quickly on the unyielding cement of the city. Every bone in her body ached. She worked her way gingerly down the rocks until she came to a path. Then, suddenly, to her surprise she heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and she saw several fine-looking gentlemen in derby hats ride by on very beautiful horses. Sally watched them with envy, wondering why they kept pumping up and down on their tiny saddles. "Posting" they called it, she remembered. Then a lady rode by. She also wore a derby hat, and Sally thought she looked funny. It was strange,



too, the way she rode with four reins and two bits in the horse's mouth. And she seemed to pull on the animal all the time.

Sally rubbed her eyes and stretched carefully. She sure must look a mess, she thought. And it was time to find that darn police station.

She saw another horse coming now, and a flood of homesickness hit her so fast the tears came to her eyes. It was a Western horse, and the rider was a cowboy. No pumping up and down. He rode plumb easy, just sitting there part of his cayuse, his Stetson cocked over his eyes. Sally couldn't see very well through the tears, but as the rider jogged toward her, she knew his pony was a sorrel. It looked like Sunny. Even had four white feet. By golly! Sally choked, sobbed, and ran into the middle of the path.

"Sunny!" she called, using the words she had heard Andy say so often. "Hay, Sunny. Oats! Oh, carrots, Sunny. Carrots!"

Through her sobs she heard the familiar whinny, and a moment later she had her arms around the warm yellow neck.

"Well, I'll be dogged!" a Western voice drawled. "If it ain't Sally Marvin," and Shorty Franklin slipped out of his saddle. "Climb on, girl, let's go. The whole darn world's lookin' for you."

When, a short time later, Mr. and Mrs. Bennett discovered Sally dragging through the door, they turned the place inside out. Servants rushed through the halls bring-

ing milk and hot water bottles. A doctor arrived and put Sally to bed, saying she was suffering from shock and exposure, and he warned her that if she did not remain quiet and sleep, she would be in no condition to ride in a rodeo parade.

Andy was only allowed a minute with her, but it was long enough to get the facts—and to realize that she had been slapped on the jaw by one Chet Myers.

Although he had only had an hour's sleep himself, his mind was working so hard that he didn't feel tired. "Detective Borland says I'm the man to work out the mystery—to find Chet," he thought. "All right, let's get to work!"

As soon as he had finished breakfast, he rushed downstairs, called a taxi, and gave the driver the name of Shorty Franklin's hotel near Madison Square Garden. Climbing hurriedly into the cab, he failed to notice the man leaning against the wall of the building, signal around the corner. A black sedan slid into Fifth Avenue. The man jumped in, and the car followed Andy's taxi.

When, a few minutes later, Andy opened the door to Shorty's hotel room, he found the little cowboy lying on his bed. He rolled over to look at Andy, and his face twisted with pain.

"Hi, boy," he said.

"What's the matter, Shorty?" Andy thought he looked so badly that for a moment he forgot Slipstream, the rodeo, and even Chet Myers. "Gee, you look in bum shape."

"Cracked ribs, or something," Shorty said. "I had some tough rides lately."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

Shorty grinned wanly. "Well . . . I sorta doctor myself," he said. "Got some good horse liniment in my bag."

"Shorty, you're crazy." Andy was worried. "Why, you were riding Sunny this morning! What did you do that for?"

"Well . . . I thought I was kinda stiff and maybe a little ride would limber me some. . . . It didn't."

Andy realized Shorty was a typical rodeo rider. Some of them broke bones and went on riding in plaster casts, others used all sorts of homemade remedies when they felt sick. While a contest was on you couldn't stop them. They went riding till they dropped.

"Let me call a doc, Shorty," Andy pleaded. "You oughtn't to ride tonight."

"I got to, Andy." Shorty sat up slowly and painfully. "One more ride, an' if I win, I'll be champion."

"Did you draw a tough horse, Shorty?"

Shorty grinned. "Kinda," he said.

"What's his name?"

Shorty sank back on a pillow and closed his eyes. Andy thought he looked embarrassed or guilty. "Slipstream," Shorty murmured.

"Slipstream!" Andy roared. "You mean Brownie. And he's the toughest buckner in all the world. Gee, Shorty, you can't ride him—he'll kill you."

"I gotta ride him." Shorty opened one eye and watched

Andy speculatively. "The rule is—you gotta ride the horse you draw. I've drawn Slipstream."

For a moment, Andy stood rocking on his heels thinking so fast it made him dizzy. Suddenly he pointed a finger at Shorty. "Phooey," he said. "You're going to redraw. Because it so happens that Mr. Slipstream belongs to me and I can prove it. I'm going to pull him from the rodeo."

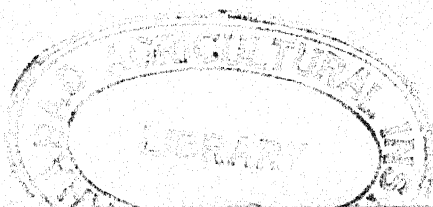
In spite of the pain, Shorty jumped from the bed as though stuck by a pin. "No, you're not," he roared. "Aw, gee," his voice changed to pleading. "You can't do it, Andy. You simply can't. I drew him. An' I'm goin' to be the first to ride him out—and good, too."

Andy sank into a chair. He was beginning to understand a lot of things now. "We'll see," he said. "But first I want some information, Shorty. And I want it straight. You didn't exactly tell the truth when I phoned you yesterday, did you? You *knew* Slipstream was Brownie."

Shorty sat down again, tortured by pain and, Andy thought, by a guilty conscience, too. "Well . . ." he said. "I kinda thought he might be."

Andy nodded. "You drew him and you didn't tell me because you were afraid I'd pull the horse before you got a chance to ride him." Andy had a sudden flash. "And Chet Myers was afraid so, too. Right?"

Shorty, glad to change the subject even a little bit, sat up again. "That's what I figger," he said. "He thought if his wife could keep you an' Sally from the rodeo, I'd have to ride Slipstream, and on account I'm so bunged up, I'd get piled off."



"Then Red would win," Andy added eagerly. "And split the winnings with Chet."

"That's about it."

"Then the mystery of the telegrams is solved," Andy said. "Now all I have to do is find Chet Myers."

"He musta jumped the reservation." Shorty shook his head. "Every cop in New York is huntin' him down."

Andy, still thinking hard, decided there was only one person who might have some idea where Chet was hidden.

"Where's Red?" he asked.

Shorty pointed toward the ceiling. "Next floor. Room 426. But look, kid," he added hurriedly, "Red has nothin' to do with this kidnappin' business. The police checked. He may have helped steal your horse, but he's on the level in the rodeo. It's a strictly fair contest, and he's been cleared by the Rodeo Cowboys' Association."

Andy stood up and opened the door. "You're hopeless, Shorty," he said. "You're ready to kill yourself just to ride Slipstream and be champ, and you're anxious to protect Red so he can beat you at it. You're nuts, Shorty, but a darn good sport."

"Then you'll leave Slipstream in?"

"I don't know, Shorty," Andy said, closing the door. "I haven't decided."

Andy Sets a Trap

ANDY PAUSED IN FRONT of room 426 to collect his thoughts. It seemed to him that he now had the whip hand over Red Wilson. If Red knew anything, he could make him talk. Down the hall he heard a door close softly, but he hardly noticed it. He banged on the panel.

"Come in."

As Andy entered, Red rose from behind a table where he had been playing solitaire. He backed against the wall, his fists clenched, and the color drained from his cheeks, leaving his face blotchy with freckles under the mop of red hair.

Andy closed the door behind him. "What's the matter, Red?" he asked.

Red's fists relaxed, and he dropped back into the chair. "I . . . I thought you was somebody else."

"Chet Myers?"

Red nodded.

"Where is he, Red?"

"I don't know, Andy," Red said, and Andy noticed that

he was not being called a dude. "I ain't seen him, I'm in the clear. The police was here."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"Him! He's a bad hombre."

Andy was surprised at Red, who had slumped down, a beaten look on his face. All the bluster had gone; all the big talk. "What's this hold he's got over you?" Andy asked. "You're big enough to handle him."

"Andy," Red leaned forward earnestly. "He's paid my entrance fees all summer with the money he made selling your horse. He owns me, darn near."

"Then if you win tonight, you'll pay him off, is that it?"

"He'll get all my money, and plenty more from bets he's made on the side."

"Suppose I pulled Slipstream from the contest and Shorty won. What would he do then?" Andy watched Red's face closely.

"He'd *get* me, Andy." Red seemed to shiver. "He swore he would. He packs a gun. You know—" Red wiped his forehead with his sleeve—"I keep thinkin' I see him fol-lerin' me. I swear I seen him this mornin' on the street. I ducked into a subway and shook him off."

Andy was beginning to feel sorry for Red; the man seemed to have lost his nerve completely.

"Look, Andy," Red went on, worriedly. "I know I've been rotten to you, but I want you to let me ride and win tonight. Leave Slipstream in. He'll pile up Shorty pronto, an' I can pay off Chet. Then I'll admit helpin' to rustle your bronc—anything you say."

Andy sat down on the bed. In spite of himself he felt like helping Red. Chet, after all, was the dangerous one.

"All right, Red," Andy said at last. "I want you to answer some questions. If you give it to me straight, I may decide to leave Slipstream in. I may not, because I have to think of Shorty. But I want straight answers."

"O.K."

"First question," Andy said. "Did Chet have a car with a trailer, Montana license, three-seven-two-six?"

"Yeah, that's how he got your horse in the first place."

Andy grinned. "Uh-huh," he said. It all began to fall in place now—like a puzzle. Since returning East he had worked out what had seemed to him a wild theory based on the trailer. Now he could test it. "Let me see if I have it right," he went on. "First you drove Brownie out of the corrals and down the road until you met Chet with the trailer."

Red nodded.

"Then Chet put the horse in the trailer, and you ran the rest of the bunch over the tracks of his car so that I couldn't tell. Then Chet hid Brownie and came back."

"You got it," Red said, beginning to smile. "But how?"

"When I was hiding in the saddle house at Torrance's, I heard you talk about the valuable bronc you didn't bring. Then I thought I saw Brownie in the trailer, that night on the train."

"I'll be dogged!" Red said admiringly.

"You took him to North Dakota and blotted his brand to a Boxed Lazy B."

"That's right. Only I didn't have nothin' to do with that. Chet done it by himself."

"After the tryout, when Chet found he was a top buckner he took him back to the homestead for a few days—then put him back in the trailer and brought him East. I almost caught up with him that night. I saw Brownie through the fog, and evidently he was taken from the Myers ranch just before I got there."

"It all checks," Red said. "Only don't think poor Mrs. Myers done it. She never knew what it was all about."

Andy sighed. "Well," he said. "That's that!" Then he grinned. "The only person wrong about seeing Brownie was Uncle Wes," he chuckled.

But Red didn't smile. "That's what I'm sorry about," he said. "I got mad at your uncle the day he got me bucked off. Chet seen I was sore, and made the most of it. I was darn well wrong. . . . You see—"

He stopped, and once again fear came into his eyes. Andy realized that someone was tapping ever so lightly on the door. It was not the knock of a man wanting to enter, but a secret animal-like sound. Red stood up and leaned on his chair, his big hands grasping the back of it, as though ready to throw it.

Andy rose from the bed, and sensing Red's fear, his own heart started to pound. If Chet had seen him come in here, Andy thought, if Chet wanted him out of the way until the rodeo was over. . . .

"Come . . . come in!" It was Red's voice, a quiver in it. Suddenly the door swung wide, and a tall figure with a

hat pulled down and a long raincoat swung into the room.

Red yanked the chair over his head, ready to smash it down. Andy ducked sideways to give him room. Sweat stood out on Red's face, and the great muscles in his arms bulged—then suddenly went slack.

"Oh, it's you," he said, dropping the chair.

Andy saw the tall figure yank off the hat. It was Mrs. Myers.

"I come to warn you," she said in her hoarse, tense voice. "Chet told me to tell you if you didn't ride and win—he'd get you. He'll be watchin' . . . an' comin' for his money."

"Where is he now?" Red asked.

"Hidin' out. I dunno where. He left me after the girl escaped."

"You meant Sally to escape, didn't you?" Andy asked quickly.

Mrs. Myers nodded, then shook her head ruefully. "Shucks!" she said. "I hadn't figgered what it was all about. The poor little girl—is she all right?"

"You bet she is and—"

Andy was interrupted by the door flying open with a bang. Once again Red grabbed his chair; Andy crowded himself against the wall, and Mrs. Myers swung around facing the door.

But this time Andy was the one to breathe a sigh of relief. "Detective Borland," he said. "You scared us almost to death."

For a moment the little man leaned on his umbrella

and looked them over, then his eyes stopped on Mrs. Myers. "Wrong again," he said briskly. "I thought for sure you were Chet Myers." He leaned back into the hall. "False alarm, boys," he shouted. "But ask Shorty Franklin to come up please."

Andy heard movements in the hall, and soon Shorty limped into the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Mr. Borland waited for Shorty to sit down, then turned on Andy. "Now, Marvin," he said, smiling. "You've had quite a time to follow up your ideas. I've had you tailed all morning, hoping you'd lead us to something. Isn't it about time you gave the police a break?"

"I haven't found where Chet is," Andy said, and told everything he had learned.

The detective poked his umbrella at a hole in the rug thoughtfully. "Then Myers stands a chance of making a lot of money tonight," he said when Andy had finished. "That is . . . if you let Mr. Franklin ride Slipstream."

"And you gotta, Andy, you gotta," Shorty broke in.

The detective turned on Shorty. "Why do you say that, Franklin?" he snapped. "Wouldn't you have a better chance if you rode an easier horse?"

Shorty shook his head. Although he looked at Borland, his words were for Andy. "I might win," he said. "Depends on the horse. But I'd never feel right about it. It may look like a sure thing to Chet Myers. . . . Maybe it is. But if I *did* buck out Slipstream—I'd be top hand at this game for sure. Don't you see—I simply gotta ride Slipstream?"

For a moment nobody spoke—but all eyes were on Andy, and he knew it was up to him. He could let Shorty ride the horse, and maybe the little cowboy would be badly injured or even killed. But suppose he didn't let him ride! Would Shorty ever forgive him? And for that matter could Shorty—an old-time rodeo hand—ever be happy again?

Andy pounded the palm of his hand with his fist. There was another angle, too, a very important one.

"Look, Mr. Borland," he said. "If Red wins this contest, Chet will come for his money. If the contest runs as advertised, couldn't we maybe set a trap for Chet?"

"Sure, that's it," Shorty broke in. "An' that means I gotta ride Slipstream."

"You've got something there, Marvin," Detective Borland said, looking up from the carpet. "I don't think Myers will be able to stay away from that show tonight. He may disguise himself, but he'll be there because he's bet everything he owns."

"An' plenty he doesn't," Mrs. Myers added dryly.

"Look, Mr. Borland!" Andy was getting excited. "Put some of your men around Red tonight. Put men on the gates. Shorty will keep an eye on the corrals in the basement until the show starts. And I'll watch the arena. It's our only chance to catch him."

"Detective Marvin," Mr. Borland stood up and put a hand on Andy's shoulder, "now that the little girl has been found, you are beginning to get in the groove. All right! We'll set the trap." He turned to Mrs. Myers. "Meantime,

you'll have to remain in police custody," he said firmly.

"With Chet goin' loco like he is," Mrs. Myers grunted, "that's the only place I'd feel safe."

"Let 'er Buck!"

IN A HUSHED Madison Square Garden, an audience of thousands, sitting in tier after tier of seats that melted away into the darkness, kept its eyes on the center of the arena where a spotlight played on three tiny figures. From the ceiling a microphone hung down, picking up their voices singing a song of the range. It was a plaintive tune, rather sad, and full of the feeling a Westerner has for the miles of plains, the rising hills, and the towering mountains seamed with ice and snow. Yet people who had never been near the West understood it and thought of the lonely cowboy riding night-herd, crooning softly to the cattle to keep them quiet.

Gradually, the song died away, echoing into the distant rafters. The spotlight faded, and the three figures disappeared. During the few seconds' pause there was almost no sound from the waiting crowd while the microphone slid silently upward toward the ceiling, the announcer took his place, and the television cameras focused across the arena.

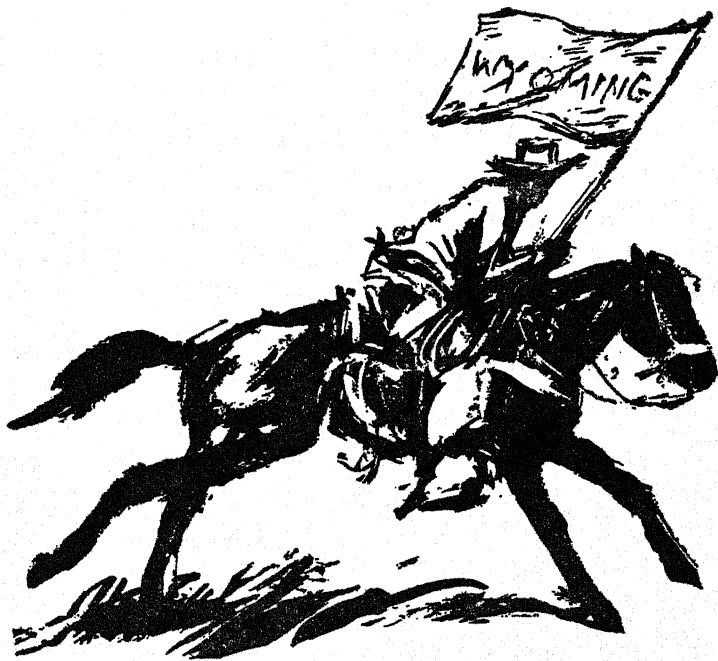
Then suddenly great banks of lights from every corner

blasted the darkness, lighting the whole Garden. At the western end, the gate opened and through it, playing a lively march, came the famous cowboy band. Every man swung along in cowboy clothes, chaps waving as he walked. Behind them, on horseback, came the color guard, the rodeo officials, then the rodeo contestants with their numbers pinned to the backs of their shirts. Riders carrying guidons showing every state in the West were followed by more and more cowboys and cowgirls. Waves of cheering and applause came from the grandstands. Over the music, cowboy yells ripped at the ceiling. Laughter greeted the famous rodeo clown dressed as a tramp and riding a tiny trained donkey. And everywhere were horses—from jet blacks, bays, and browns to bright pintos, palominos, and spotted appaloosas. The parade riders, except the contestants, wore the loudest, most vividly colored shirts they could buy, and the horses carried saddles and bridles studded with silver conchos that sparkled in the glaring lights. Outside, the life of a big Eastern city went on—but inside the Garden the cowboy West took over.

Behind the flag of the state of Wyoming rode two of the most excited people of all: Sally, dressed in an orange shirtwaist, fringed vest, and fringed split skirt of buckskin, rode a golden palomino with a white mane and tail, and alongside her, Andy, grinning from ear to ear, sat his beloved Sunny. He had had no time to buy a fancy shirt and he looked more like a contestant than a parade rider.

In spite of his worries about finding Chet, he was thinking of nothing but the music, the color, the excitement—

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INSIDE THE GARDEN THE COWBOY WEST TOOK OVER

and Sally, looking prettier than he had ever seen her. And Sunny, too, who had never had such a currying in all his life. Not that the pony cared. Andy was tickled by Sunny's attitude, and he felt he could almost read the little horse's mind. Sunny was not a parade horse. There were lots of fancy animals there who carried their heads higher, who flaunted their manes, and pranced as they walked. But Sunny had no use for that kind of foolishness. He was a working horse, a calf roper, and a mountain pony. He walked with his neck straight, as though he were on the trail or cutting stock from a bunch. He was all business, and only his ears betrayed his excitement. They would prick forward listening to the band, then they would flip back. Who were all those horses behind them? Was the boss going to let him break into a lope pretty soon and wrangle some of this stock into line?

Andy wished he could enter Sunny in a contest. He would, too, some day, when he was old enough, he thought. It was a shame not to let Sunny show how he could follow a calf.

Sally looked at Sunny and smiled. "He wants to go to work," she shouted. "I like my pony, but seeing Sunny makes me homesick. I kind of miss little Pint."

"You look all right," Andy said. "That's a good parade horse."

His eyes wandered around the arena. They had reached the far end and passed the chutes where the broncs for bareback riding stood ready for the first event. His eyes

went over the crowd, thousands upon thousands of faces. Was Chet Myers in there somewhere? He saw a policeman or two along the back aisles, and he knew that plainclothes men were there, too, watching with cold eyes.

He saw Red Wilson standing by one of the chutes, helping to put a surcingle on a bronc. Above him one of the men from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals observed the proceedings. Was he watching animals, or looking for Chet? Was he really an S.P.C.A. man, or a detective sent by Mr. Borland? Andy wished he didn't have to worry about things like that. It spoiled the fun; this was a night to howl—to think about broncs, and roping, and horses, and fun. Every now and then, all evening long, his eyes wandered over the audience, watching, hunting for the heavy figure of the man with whom he had a score to settle.

After the rodeo officials had been introduced, and the parade was over, Andy and Sally went to Mr. Bennett's ringside box near the chutes. Below them, Shorty Franklin leaned against the arena wall and told them about different riders in the bareback-bronc riding contest. Andy was fascinated not only by the riders, but by the pickup men riding skillful horses. "I sure wish I could get Sunny into a contest," he said.

Mr. Bennett was listening and slipped out of the box, to return a few minutes later grinning from ear to ear. "Any reason Andy couldn't ride in the calf roping?" he asked Shorty.

Shorty shook his head. "Afraid he ain't able to yet," he said. "The Rodeo Cowboys' Association wouldn't let him."

"I don't mean that," Mr. Bennett said. "I mean would it be dangerous for Andy?"

"No, I don't suppose so." Shorty was watching the famous horseback quadrille. "But it can't be done."

At the first mention of his name, Andy's heart had jumped into his throat. It was impossible, incredible! He and Sunny out there running a calf! Then he heard Shorty answer, and he knew it was just a dream. Anyway, the contest would start in a moment, right after the trick-riding act.

"Well, I think it's been arranged just the same." Andy felt Mr. Bennett's hand on his shoulder. "Go get your pony, Andy. They've given permission for you to make a special exhibition ride. Not as a regular contestant, of course."

Andy looked up at Mr. Bennett, "Please," he said. "Look, Mr. Bennett, you're not kidding, are you?"

"No, I'm not kidding. I know the officials well. You can't enter a contest, but the head of the Rodeo Cowboys' Association says you can ride for fun if you want to. Just to show what you can do."

Ten minutes later Andy was sitting Sunny watching the last of the official ropers in the contest make his ride. Now that his wish was actually coming true, he was frightened, right down to his spurs. As if in a dream, he saw

the flag go down and the rider cross the barrier. The man had a fast, well-bred Quarter Horse, a special roping saddle, and he streaked after his calf as though he did it every day. But he missed with the first throw and caught with the second. The roping had been poor all evening.

There was a pause in the action. Andy wondered what he was supposed to do, then he heard the announcer, his voice echoing over the public-address system:

"Ladies and Gentlemen. Now with the special permission of the management of Madison Square Garden and the Rodeo Cowboys' Association, we present a special attraction. You've all read in the newspapers about the little girl who came East from Wyoming and was nearly kidnapped, and of the boy who tried so hard to rescue her. This boy, an Easterner who has spent his summers in the West, is in the opinion of all of us here, cowboys and Easterners alike, a deadgame sport. He has his horse with him, and we have decided to give him a chance to show what he can do."

As the announcer went on speaking, Andy began to feel smaller and smaller. He had to ride past the end of the arena to get behind the barrier, and as he started across, a spotlight picked him up, and he felt thousands of eyes boring into him. A blush burned his cheeks, his throat was dry, and his heart beat so hard that he felt dizzy.

". . . After all," the announcer droned on. "Many of our greatest riders went West when they were kids. And although this boy was born right here in New York, he is a credit to Wyoming, too. It's boys like him who have

made rodeo the great, clean American sport it is. So we have decided to let him try to rope a calf. Ladies and gentlemen . . . We take pleasure in presenting—Andy Marvin!"

Andy heard the applause, and his hands shook on the reins. Someone was below him, and looking down he saw the carrotty head of Red Wilson. "Here, take a piggin string," the man said, grinning up at him. "An' go get that calf, boy!" Andy's shaking hand took the bit of rope used to tie the calf's legs. "Thanks," he murmured, and coiling it shakily, he jammed it between his teeth.

"If you catch him, remember, three legs gotta be tied," Red went on. "Don't rush it. Better make a good tie in slow time than have the calf get up and run on you."

Andy nodded, the sweat pouring down his face. He knew he couldn't do it. Why had he shot his mouth off and given Mr. Bennett this crazy idea? These people had been watching the greatest ropers in the country, and now they were going to see Andy Marvin make a fool of himself. Thousands of people! *Thousands* would laugh at him.

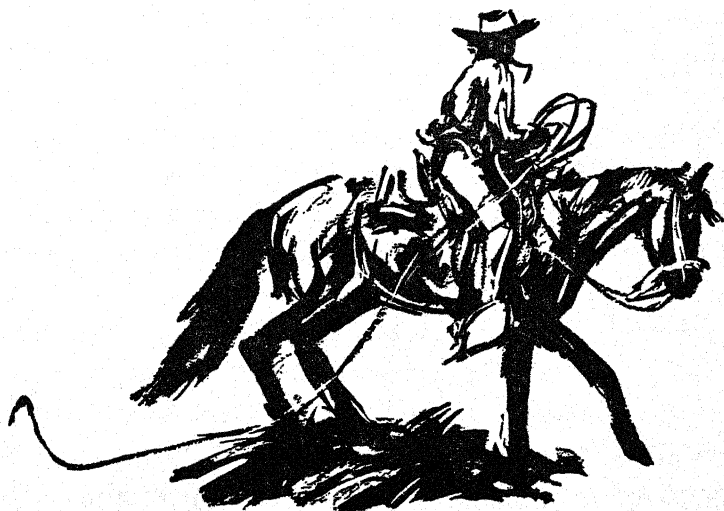
"Don't lose your nerve!" It was Red talking again—Red, who had always made fun of him and called him a dude. Andy swallowed and chewed on the rope. How did Sunny feel about it?

Sunny didn't feel a thing, except that his master was nervous. On the other side of those boards there was a bawling calf that looked as though he might run. "Must be I'm going to run him," Sunny's ears said. "Let's go, boss."

Andy took a deep breath. "All right," he thought. "Anyway, Sunny won't make a fool of himself." He looked for a second across the arena and saw Sally jumping up and down like a crazy girl. She was shaking her hands above her head like a tiny prize fighter, urging him on, telling him he could do it. He remembered how she had stopped him months before when he was about to ride his first bucking horse out of a chute. It was all right to be afraid, she had said. You just go ahead and do it anyway.

Andy untied his rope and slid out a big loop. His hands were soft, the rope harsh, and he realized that he hadn't

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tossed a loop in three months. Sunny's ears wagged excitedly. So they *were* going to rope, huh! Just what he wanted. Andy pulled Sunny behind the chalk-line barrier, and felt the little sorrel's muscles bunch under him. He saw the man with the flag watching him. The audience was silent now, waiting, hoping for a thrill, a laugh—anything that would amuse them.

Andy took a deep breath, bit into the piggin string, and nodded to the man with the flag.

A gate opened, a jumping, bawling calf ran across the line.

The barrier flag flashed down.

Stop That Man!

SUNNY JUMPED AS though fired from a gun and rocketed after his calf, and once Andy felt the familiar muscles rippling under him, he forgot the crowd, the spotlights—everything.

At first, the calf lit straight out, and Sunny gained on him with every jump, but just as Andy started to swing his loop around his head, the calf ducked sideways, away from a wall of the arena. Andy held his loop back just in time, and Sunny, turning fast, drove his hoofs after the bawling little Brahma.

Once again, Sunny drew close, and this time Andy's loop shot out. All the hours of practice for the last two summers, the hundreds of times he had roped stumps, sagebrush, pigs, colts, and calves—all went into that one loop that dropped straight and sure over the calf's neck.

True to his training, Sunny stopped fast but gently. The calf staggered, but did not fall.

A second later, Andy was off his horse, running down the taut rope and diving for the calf's body. The boys in the chutes had picked a small one for Andy, but even so, it

was a Brahma and weighed nearly two hundred and fifty pounds. Andy struggled with it, grabbing it by the nose and pulling it off its feet the way Uncle Wes had taught him. As he did so, he had the familiar feeling of his shirt coming out, but he kept at it, looping one leg to a second, and finally to a third. He made sure his knot was tight and strong, then leaped to his feet and held up his hands to show that he had finished. The judge behind him dropped his flag, the timer stopped his watch, and the judges inspected his knot.

But Andy hardly noticed them. His ears were deafened by the applause, and once again he felt himself blushing. Panting with his exertion, he tried to tuck in his shirt, then turned and saw Sunny holding his calf, his ears pricked forward saying, "How'd we do, boss? O.K., huh?"

Andy felt a lump rise in his throat. How could you lose with a horse like that?

"O.K. Turn him loose," the judge said. "Nice work, kid."

Andy went to Sunny, loosened the rope, and reaching in his pocket he pulled out a carrot. He stuffed it in the horse's eager mouth, felt the soft mushy nose in the palm of his hand, and without thinking, he hugged the pony around the neck.

He heard the crowd roar with applause and laughter. But Andy wasn't embarrassed or scared now. The kids were with him and Sunny all right. He could hear them.

A few minutes later when Andy had ridden over by the chutes to talk to Sally and Mr. Bennett, the announcer

gave the final scores. "And on a special exhibition ride," he said, "Andy Marvin, riding his horse, Sunny, made a perfect tie in fifty seconds."

"Good boy!" Sally reached down from the box and scrubbed his hair. "Give Sunny another carrot for me."

Shorty Franklin came limping over and slapped Andy on the back. "Fastest record on a Brahma here in the Garden's only about twenty seconds," he said. "Maybe you better go professional. Just so long as you don't wear that shirt you had on last summer."

Without thinking, Andy felt the shoulder where he had torn his shirt on the fence that day last July, and to his surprise he felt a spot where the shirt had been darned.

"Shorty," he said. "This proves it. Look! There isn't a darn thing in that superstition of yours. This *is* the same shirt!"

Shorty leaned over and his tired eyes examined the carefully sewn shoulder. "Well, I'll be dogged," he said. "I might have known."

"Might have known what?"

"That shirt was just waitin', waitin' for you to reach the Garden. It's a good-luck shirt, by golly."

Andy laughed; the lights were down now, and he was watching a famous movie star standing in the spotlight singing to his horse. "You can't have it both ways, Shorty," he said. "How can a shirt be bad luck one day and good luck the next?"

"I dunno," Shorty answered, his voice serious. "But that's the way it is."

The movie star was making his horse kneel and do circus tricks. Andy wished he would hurry up so that the bulldogging would start.

"Look." Shorty was close to Andy's ear. "Do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure." Andy wondered if he could teach Sunny to dance and decided the sorrel wouldn't like such fancy stuff. Probably kick over the nearest roof.

"Lemme wear your shirt, Andy. Right now while the lights are down we can swap."

Andy turned to look at the little bronc rider. He meant it, all right. This was his last ride coming up, probably the last time he would ever buck out of a chute, and he was riding the wickedest horse ever to buck in the Garden. Andy didn't believe in good-luck shirts and things like that—but if Shorty *thought* it important, if it gave him a tiny bit more confidence, maybe it *would* help. He didn't know, but he peeled off the shirt anyway, and they changed in the darkness by the chutes.

The lights went on and the crowd cheered the movie star. They saw the bulldogging and other events; then, at last, saddle-bronc riding was announced.

Andy hadn't had time to take Sunny from the arena. He stood in a corner by the chutes, with the sorrel's reins in his hands, watching rider after rider buck out his horse, and each time Andy seemed to see his friend—the man who had done so much for him—having his back twisted or his legs smashed.

Suddenly, Andy felt a hand pound his shoulder. Look-

ing up at the Bennett box he saw Sally, her face tense with excitement. "Look!" she said. "Look in Chute Number Three. It's Brownie. I'd know him anywhere."

Andy climbed a fence to a point where he could look down on the horses. It was Brownie all right. He was in good shape, too, fat as butter, and just as dopey-looking as ever. He showed no signs of excitement as they dropped the saddle on his back, or even when they tightened the flank cinch. He stood there with his head down peering between the bars like a small boy looking through a knot-hole at a baseball game.

Next to him, they were saddling Red's bronc, Infighter, and Andy could hear him snort and paw the gate. Once he reared, smashing his hoofs down on the boards, and Andy heard the crowd gasp. But he knew that what the horse did in the chute was unimportant. In fact, they sometimes used up a lot of bucking energy that way before the ride began.

He saw Red Wilson climb to the top of the chute and prepare to drop into the saddle. "Ride him, Red," Andy called. He didn't want Red to win, but the big cowboy had helped to cheer him up when he was calf roping, and it was only fair to return the compliment. He saw Red grin and wave his hand. His confidence had returned. He sure thought he was going in to win!

And the man who had paid his entry fees, Chet Myers—where was he?

Once again Andy glanced around at the thousands of people. Was Chet here somewhere in this vast arena, or

had he scented the trap and slunk away like a coyote?

Andy's train of thought was broken by the announcer.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he roared. "You folks here tonight are mighty lucky. For you are about to see two of the greatest riders on two of the wildest horses ever to come into this arena. Coming out of Chute Number Two will be young Red Wilson, a real Wyoming boy, on Infighter. This is Red's first year of rodeo, and yet this very minute he is riding for the championship. After riding ten horses, he is tied for first place with Shorty Franklin with three thousand two hundred and seventy-three points." There was wild applause from the crowd and Red waved his hat.

"Coming out of Chute Three," the announcer went on, "will be one of the finest men ever to enter the sport of rodeo—the veteran cowboy Shorty Franklin, of Billings, Montana. Shorty has drawn the toughest horse ever seen in the Garden, a rootin' tootin' wild mustang named Slipstream. During this rodeo, a lot of good boys have tried to ride him. All but one were thrown clear and he pulled leather. This horse is as good as the famous Ten Minutes to Midnight, and Shorty's hundreds of friends right in this arena tonight are in there rooting for him—and kind of scared for him, too."

The crowd applauded again, and Andy saw little Shorty climb slowly to the top of the chute. He looked small and tired, and his shirt—the one Andy had given him—hung on him like a rag.

"And now—" the applause died away—"and now . . .

let me say for every cowboy here in the Garden tonight, and for the audience, too. Here's good luck to two great riders—and may the best man win! . . . Red Wilson coming out of Chute Number Two—on Infighter!”

The audience became so quiet that it seemed every single person was holding his breath, and every eye was on Chute Number Two. Suddenly a man yanked open the gate and a heavy horse plunged into the arena. He was a fighter and he came down hard, stiff-legged, and on his back the redheaded boy, yowling like a wolf, raked the horse's shoulders, then plunged his spurs into the animal's flanks. It seemed almost as though horse and man were wrestling for mastery. The horse hit the ground like a battering ram, and it looked as though at every jump Red's teeth would be shaken out of his head. But he rode out his ten seconds, gripping the rein hard and close to the horse's neck; when the timer's gun fired, the pickup men rode up on each side of the plunging bronc, and while one of them reached for the reins, the other loosened the flank cinch.

Red pulled his feet from the stirrups, and slid across the pickup man's horse to the ground. The crowd roared approval, and waving his hat happily at them, Red swaggered across the arena to the wall.

As far as Andy could tell, Red Wilson had made a perfect ride on a real back-breaker of a bronc. He wondered how long Shorty could have stood that pounding. Yet Shorty—Andy felt a lump in his throat—was going to ride a worse horse, *his* horse, the toughest bronc the Garden had ever seen. He glanced at Chute Number

Three. Brownie's nose was close to the bars, a gentle soft nose that he, Andy, had petted many a time. It was still hard to believe that he was an outlaw bronc.

He saw Shorty slip gingerly down onto the bronc's back—a little, bent-over, half cripple who just wouldn't give in—and he turned his eyes away.

"Coming out of Chute Number Three," roared the announcer, "Shorty Franklin on Slipstream."

Once again, the audience seemed to hold its breath. This was the moment they had been waiting for all evening, and this was the ride that would decide once and for all who was the Champion Bronc Rider.

But Shorty was in no hurry. Evidently he was taking his time, making sure of his spurs, his stirrups, his hold on the rein. The tension became so great that the cowboys sitting along the wall of the arena moved restlessly, and Andy could feel his heart pounding, his breath coming fast.

Then the gate was flung open.

Brownie came out at a dead run, with Shorty spurring him hard, waiting for what he knew was coming.

Suddenly Brownie stopped dead, bucked fast, and followed it with the strange, high, twisting kick that Andy had seen last summer.

A smaller horse than Infighter, he hit harder, and bucked faster. He twisted, sunfished, whirled, and yanked the saddle from side to side, writhing like a cobra. Yet Shorty, his little legs raking shoulder and flank, stuck to the bronc like a cocklebur. Where Red fought his horse,

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"SHORTY FRANKLIN ON SLIPSTREAM," ROARED THE AN-
NOUNCER

Shorty outguessed him, and seemed to sense where the next twist, buck, or jump was coming from. He looked incredibly lithe and easy in the saddle, and he waved his hat wildly in his free hand.

But Andy noticed one sign, one thing that showed Shorty was in pain—he didn't make a sound. No yelling or yipping from him. He was fighting a deadly fight, using every single bit of brain and muscle he had left. To Andy it seemed hours before the timer's gun went up and blasted at the roof.

The pickup men dove in to grab Brownie—but they arrived too late. The bronc gave a great twisting roll to his back, and Shorty slid from the saddle. For an instant it looked as though his foot was caught in the stirrup and he would be hung up and kicked to pieces, then he fell free and lay flat on the tanbark, a crumpled, tiny figure all by himself under the glare of the lights.

"Doctor and stretcher," called the judge, dismounting quickly, and cowboys from all around the arena rushed toward the center.

Andy, Sunny's reins still in his hand, ran out too, tears streaming down his cheeks. He forgot the wonderful ride Shorty had made; he forgot Brownie who stood at the end of the arena looking on mildly at the excitement. His whole thought was of Shorty himself, the gamest little cowboy ever to ride in rodeo.

By the time he reached the body, a crowd surrounded it, and Andy had to plow his way through.

"Give him air," the doctor said. "Back away. Give him

air." Two men with a stretcher pushed through the gathering. Behind them, the audience was on its feet, straining to see what was going on.

It took some time to get Shorty onto the stretcher. He was moved carefully and expertly so that, if there were fractures in his spine or neck, no further harm would come to him. Andy found himself in the front of the group, Sunny's reins still in his sweaty hand, looking down on the little man, pale and shriveled as they rolled him onto his back.

Then suddenly the tension was broken by the announcer. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he shouted. "By the unanimous opinion of the judges—we present the Champion Bronc Rider of the World—Shorty Franklin!"

A great cheer went up from the crowd, and the hand clapping was deafening. Andy, looking down at Shorty, felt a smile come over his tear-stained face. Then suddenly Shorty opened his eyes, and looking up, his gaze wandered until it caught Andy's glance. A shy grin came over his face. "Now what do you think of that shirt of yours?" he said.

The cowboys around Andy began applauding, too. "Atta boy, Shorty," they said. "You rode him down to a nub."

"Make way," the doctor said. "He's all right, I think, but we better carry him off and look him over."

Andy turned back toward the Bennett box to tell Sally and Mr. Bennett that Shorty was not badly hurt. Around the chutes, the hands were preparing for the final event,

the wild horse race. The crowd was still applauding, standing on seats, trying to get a better view of Shorty as the stretcher was picked up and carried toward an exit.

Andy was halfway to the box when he noticed a man in the second row start to leave. He was slipping down the front aisle toward an exit. The stocky build, the aggressive outthrust chin, the way he had of pushing past the other people without stopping, regardless of whose toes he stepped on, reminded Andy vaguely of somebody he knew. The man wore an Eastern hat and a light overcoat.

Andy's mind was on Shorty and his ride and what he would say to Sally—when suddenly it clicked. That was Chet Myers! Chet had lost. He was getting out now, while the going was good.

"Stop that man," Andy yelled. "Stop him. That's the kidnapper."

But the crowd was still applauding Shorty as they carried him out. Nobody heard; nobody moved to hold up the man's exit.

"Stop him," Andy shouted as loud as he could. Chet was diagonally across from him and had reached the bottom aisle. In a minute he would be gone, down one of the yawning exits. Andy was about to run when he remembered the reins in his hand. He pulled Sunny toward him, and leaped into the saddle.

"Grab that guy!" He pointed and jumped Sunny into a run.

It was then that the crowd near Chet began to notice the boy on the sorrel galloping toward them. At the same

instant, Chet saw him, too, and broke into a run. The exit was only a hundred feet away. Andy knew he could never get off his horse and climb the wall in time to catch him.

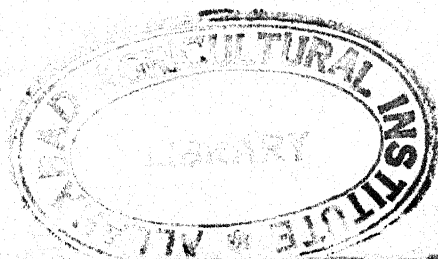
Chet, driving past several spectators, tripped over something and fell headlong. People around him stood back, afraid or just not understanding. Chet scrambled to his feet again and ran as hard as he could.

Andy was only fifty feet away when he thought of his rope. He yanked it free of its thong, and slid out his loop.

For a moment, Chet was caught behind an old man and was trying to push him out of the way. Andy swung the loop in slow circles around his head. This was his greatest chance, more important than the calf, or Brownie, or anything else. This was the man who had tried to kidnap Sally, who had slapped her across the face.

Chet ducked from behind the bystander and made a final burst for the exit.

Andy's loop shot out.



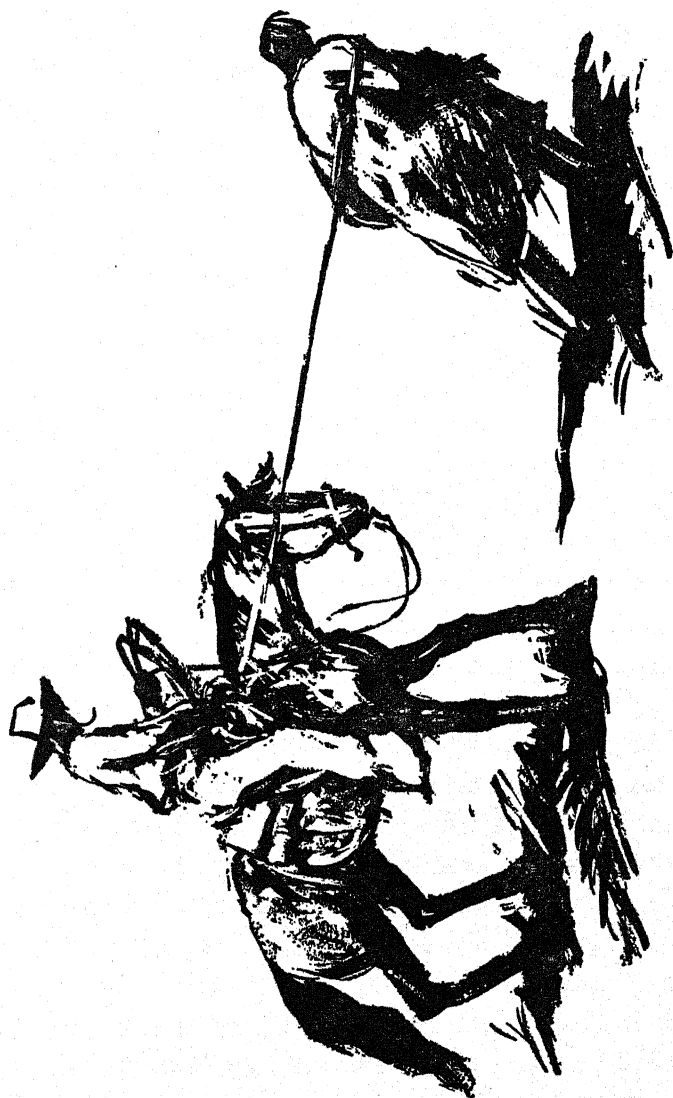
The Man Who Slapped Sally Marvin

THE LOOP FELL easily over Chet's head and was down almost to his waist before Andy could pull it tight. He yanked Sunny back on his haunches, then turned him and pulled away from the wall. Chet staggered. His hands clawed at the rope, desperately trying to loosen the loop.

Now that Andy had his man, he didn't know quite what to do. "Police!" he yelled. "Grab this man." But nobody seemed to understand. Andy pulled a bit harder, and Chet, unable to slip out of the noose, stumbled toward the arena. Behind him the crowd stood up, fascinated, thinking this was some crazy cowboy joke.

Then Chet seemed to make up his mind. Taking Andy by surprise, he rushed toward the wall, vaulted over it, and landing squarely on his feet, he grabbed the rope around his waist while the loop was still slack.

But he didn't fool Sunny. The sorrel had been trained on a lot of strange animals besides calves. He backed away so fast that the rope stretched taut again; then he stopped



SUNNY BACKED AWAY SO FAST THAT THE ROPE STRETCHED TAUT AGAIN

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and stood with his ears pricked forward, staring at the strange-looking critter his master had caught.

Chet bared his teeth in fury. He clawed at the tight hemp noose, tearing, ripping at it with his fingers. Then realizing that he must fool the horse, he grabbed the rope with both hands and pulled, at the same time walking forward. Sunny, feeling no lack of tension, stayed where he was.

But this time Andy was ready. He backed Sunny away suddenly and pulled the writhing Chet from his feet. Then he slipped from the saddle and ran down the rope toward his enemy.

But before Andy could reach him Chet pulled himself up again, and freed himself from the loop. His overcoat was half off, and he fumbled in it, looking for the gun he had hidden there.

To Andy it felt like any afternoon on a football field. He smashed into Chet just below the knees, slamming the big man to earth, and driving the air from his lungs.

Chet kicked; he sat up and started swinging, and Andy, up on one knee, slugged back. This was the man who had hit Sally! Andy drove a right into Chet's eye. The guy who had locked her up! He smashed a left at the man's face, driving it as hard as he could at the snarling mouth.

But Chet, shaking off the blows, suddenly reached for Andy's neck. His great arm dragged the boy down, and he pulled, tightening the muscles, cutting Andy's wind.

All this happened so fast that at first only the audience nearby had noticed it; then more and more people began

to point and shout. The pickup man who had cornered Brownie and yanked off his saddle, loped toward the fight. At the other end of the arena the men who had escorted Shorty from the field, the hands preparing the chutes for the wild horse race—everyone started running toward the scene of action, while the announcer shouted over his public-address system for the police.

But all this was too late to help Andy. Gradually his blows weakened. He saw great flashes of light before his eyes, burning pinwheels, sickening stars, and through them Chet's sweating face, close to his, as he tightened the strangling arm. Gasping, struggling, fighting for breath, Andy felt himself slipping, down . . . down . . . to where everything was a whirling black. . . .

Even after they pulled Chet off, Andy lay for a long time, his body twitching, his breath coming in great gasps. But at last he came to, choking and feeling sick at his stomach. As the sight came back to his burning eyes, he sat up slowly, and gingerly felt his neck. Gradually, he became aware that he was surrounded by a crowd of rodeo officials and cowboys. Above him, Chet Myers stood, his hands pinioned behind his back by a big cowboy.

"How are you feeling?" an official asked, and Andy recognized two men leaning over him. One was a judge and the other the man who owned all the rodeo stock.

"All right, I guess," Andy pulled himself to his feet, staggering a little, and turned on Chet. "Arrest that man,"

he choked. "He's . . . he's the man who kidnapped Sally Marvin."

"You're a liar," Chet grunted. "Never seen you in my life before."

"How do you know this is the man?" the official asked. "Where's the police?" he yelled. "Let's get at the truth of this."

"That's easy," said a chirping voice, and through the crowd came a little man swinging his umbrella. He looked strange and unimportant among those tall, gangling cowboys, but he cleared a path and pulled a badge from his pocket. "Detective Borland," he said to the official. "And this is Sally Marvin. She'll identify Myers."

Sally ran to Andy. "You all right, Andy?" she asked. "Did he hurt you?"

Andy took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "I'm O.K., Sally," he said. "Now can you identify in this bunch the guy who tried to kidnap you?"

"Certainly." Sally pointed at Chet. "That's Chet Myers. He's cut off his moustache. But I'd know him anywhere."

Policemen were arriving from all points of the compass by that time, and Borland jerked a thumb at the big man still held by the cowboy. "Slip the cuffs on him," he said to a cop, and Chet Myers, who a few months before had tried to put Andy in jail, felt the steel bracelets grip his wrists.

"Let's get off the floor," the official said. "I'll get the wild horse race going. The crowd's upset."

"Just a minute." Andy saw a chance to complete the

evidence, to put a finish to the mystery of the stolen bronc. He turned to the stockowner. "Before you start loading your stock, I might as well tell you that Chet Myers stole a horse from me named Brownie. You're using him now, calling him Slipstream."

The stockman's eyes widened with surprise. "*Slipstream!* You must be mistaken there," he said. "I didn't buy Slipstream from Myers. He's my horse, and the best buckner in the world. I'm afraid your imagination's running away with you, kid."

Andy grinned. He'd heard that about his imagination before. Red Wilson had accused him of it. So had Chet Myers. Uncle Wes had laughed over it, and even Sally had been skeptical. Imagination, my eye!

"Sally," he asked. "Didn't you recognize Slipstream as Brownie?"

"That's right," Sally said to the stockman. "Myers must have sold Brownie to somebody else, and that somebody sold him to you."

"Is your brand on him?" the stockman asked skeptically.

"Our brand, the Lazy TP is on him, but it's been blotted to a Boxed Lazy B," Andy said.

"You'll have to prove all this." The stockman shook his head. "That's the most valuable horse I own."

"If he's still in the arena, I'll sure try," Andy said.

"He's here." The pickup man pointed. "Over there in the corner."

"O.K., let me through." Andy elbowed his way through the group. As he started toward Brownie, he felt a warm

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breath along his neck, and turning he found Sunny nuzzling him. He had been outside the crowd, and was worried about what had happened to his master. Now he was saying, "You all right, boss? Shall we rope somebody else now?"

Andy grinned and rubbed the little sorrel's neck. Picking up the reins he whispered to Sunny, "Let's see if you remember an old friend of yours, boy." And aloud he added, "If you'll stand back, please, I'll see if I can prove Brownie is my horse."

The officials, the judges, the cowboys, and the police backed away, leaving Andy and Sunny alone under the lights.

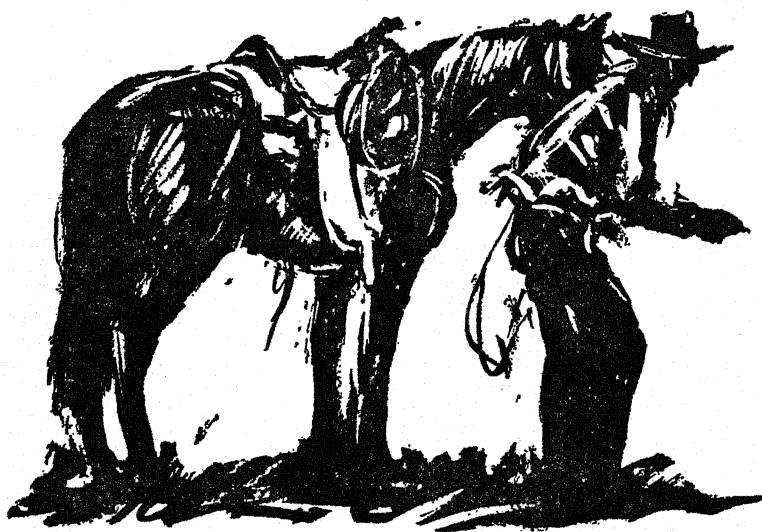
All this time, the audience had been watching the little group, but now that the action seemed to be over, they had begun to lose interest. Cowboys were crazy anyway, they thought, and a couple of them had had a fight—that was all. They had no idea of the strict rules the rodeo cowboys have against rowdyism.

But now they realized something more was going to happen. An official waved at the band until it stopped playing, and the crowd watched the young boy and the little sorrel horse cross the open arena. Why was he walking toward the famous bucking horse? Wasn't it dangerous? What was going on, anyway?

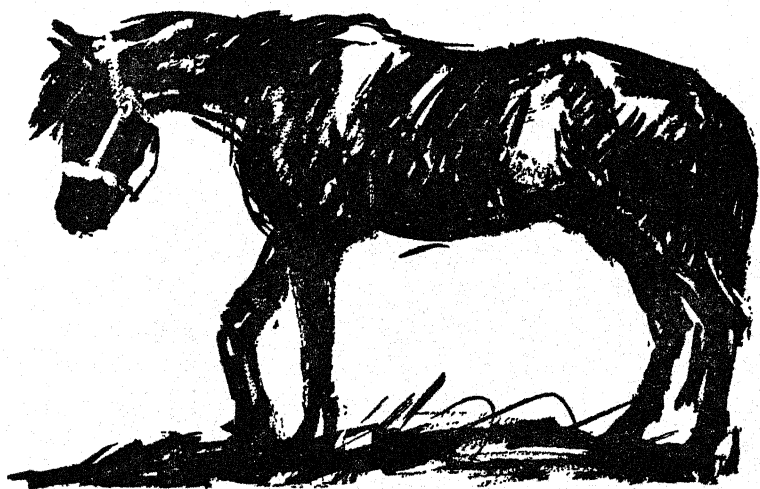
Andy moved slowly and quietly. It had been a long time and a lot of things had happened to Brownie since that day last July when Uncle Wes had first tried to ride him. More than likely Brownie wouldn't remember him, and

it would take a confession from Chet to prove his point. But this was worth a try. He forgot the crowd, and Sally, and the fight he had been in. It was just a matter of his and Sunny's catching a pet horse, the way they did in Wyoming.

He had covered half the distance when Sunny pricked up his ears. Perhaps the scent of the bronc reached him, or maybe he had heard a familiar sound. It is hard to tell just how a horse first identifies a pal with whom he has spent a long winter on the range. But Sunny knew. Suddenly, over the sound of the broncs in the chutes pawing the gates, came his long, loud whinny echoing up to the rafters.



HE MIGHT BE SLIPSTREAM, THE WORLD'S GREATEST



OUTLAW, BUT HE WAS JUST AN OLD PET TO ANDY

Night Flight West

THE BRONC'S HEAD came up; his ears pricked forward inquiringly. Horses in the chutes answered Sunny's whinny, and Brownie wasn't sure. Maybe he was just dreaming, thinking back to when he was a colt in the hills.

But Sunny was sure. He nickered again, and Andy was near enough now. "Hay, Brownie! Oats! Carrots!" he shouted.

This time Brownie's head went high, and his ears almost jumped out of their sockets. He might forget a pal, but no horse in the world forgets the call of the oat bin. That was the boss of the bin, all right, and he always carried something good in his pocket.

Slowly, curiously, he walked toward Andy and Sunny. Andy stopped in his tracks. Let Brownie prove his own identity! He might be Slipstream, the world's greatest outlaw, to the crowd, but he was just an old pet to Andy.

Brownie walked right up to him, and started searching him for carrots. Sunny snuffled his nose, saying "Hi, boy,

how's tricks?" And it seemed to Andy that Brownie answered, "Swell, son, easiest racket in the world. Just pile 'em off."

Andy turned and looked behind him. The group watching him were grinning. Sally was jumping up and down slapping her buckskin knees, and everyone looked happy except the stock owner, who was shaking his head ruefully. "He's your horse, all right," he groaned. "I guess I'll either have to lose him, or buy him all over again."

"Northwest Airlines, Flight Number Two, Saint Paul, Minneapolis, and connections with Fargo, Miles City, Billings. . . ."

Andy, standing with Sally and Shorty at the airport waiting for the plane, listened as the announcer droned on, going west, farther and farther west.

Reporters were still around, asking questions, interviewing Sally, shooting pictures of the two of them standing with the Champion Brone Rider of the World. Andy picked up Sally's suitcase, and the three of them started across to the big airliner waiting on the concrete apron.

"Do you think I was right in selling Brownie?" he asked Sally.

"You bet." Sally smiled up at him. "A good buckner has about the softest life in the world. Dad told me that they actually work about ten or eleven minutes a year. The rest of the time they just graze. And Brownie loves to pile 'em up."

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"He piled up more money for me when I sold him than I've ever seen in my life before," Andy said. "Will you do what I asked you, soon, Sally, and write me about it? Check the old Worthington Ranch. See if it's for sale. I've got enough money now."

"Leave it to me." Sally's smile was kind of misty, Andy thought. "I'll get Dad. He can buy it for you, and it'll be a swell spread when you get it fixed up. Plenty of Forest Service land for grazing stock, too."

"An' if you're lookin' for a good stock foreman, a run-over heel to buy horses, do chores, and loaf under the haystack when you ain't lookin', I'm your man." Shorty grabbed Andy's hand and nearly crushed the bones as he pumped the arm up and down. "Good-by, boy!"

"That's good!" A news photographer jumped toward them. "Hold it, please."

"O.K., bud," Shorty said. "Call this one: Famous Rodeo Hand Welcomes Wyoming's Newest Rancher."

"Right." The photographer clicked his shutter, and prowled around them looking for another shot.

The last twenty-four hours had been for Andy and Sally a whirl of excitement. There had been statements to make to the police, a big press conference, and a radio and television interview. Then that afternoon, Andy and Sally and Mrs. Bennett had taken Mrs. Myers shopping, and Mrs. Bennett had bought the ranch woman several complete new outfits.

But now it was over; Sally was leaving, and Andy, too, had to return to school that evening. As he kissed her

good-by, he wanted to go West with her so badly he thought for a moment of stowing away on the plane.

After Sally had disappeared into the cabin, the ground crew pulled away the entrance steps, and one by one the motors started. Andy watched, a small figure standing alone on the great field. The pilot taxied the great airliner, its red and green lights glowing in the evening, to the end of his strip. He revved each motor separately, then all at once in one great blast of power. Slowly the ship started to move forward, gained headway, and roared past Andy, past the buildings, past the crowds and the other planes—then gradually leaving the ground, it rose above water and the city and turned westward where great piles of cumulus clouds banked the evening sky.

Andy thought of the plane rushing into the evening light—following the old trails of the pioneers, the trappers, and the covered wagons. They had all felt the same call of the open country, where game grazed in the parks and ponies raced across the range.

All Andy could see now was a tiny speck against the clouds with a taillight winking, beckoning him on westward, toward the distant mountains. He'd follow that gleam before long, he thought. He would have a ranch all his own, and be right up there in the mountains making a life for himself—a real life.

"Hold it, sonny!" It was that darn photographer again. Andy came back to earth.

"Make it fast, mister," he said. "I've got a date."

"Yeah? Whaddya know! Who with?"

"Up in a barn near Central Park," Andy said, heading for a taxi, "there's a sorrel horse. And right now I think maybe he's almost as lonely as I am."

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